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The Cataleptic Moment: Sweet Substitutes in Stevens and Proust

C. ROLAND WAGNER

The whole world breathes and calls to me
Who marble-bound must ever be.
—Faulkner, "The Marble Faun"

THERE IS A MOMENT WHEN the poetic visions of Wallace Stevens and Marcel Proust meet. We can increase our understanding of both writers—although Stevens is my main subject—by examining that moment and finding its source in both life and art, in the similarities of their world views and in their own feelings about personal relationships. There is no separating poetic vision from personal life.¹ Proust's homosexuality and Stevens' relationship with his wife are intrinsic to their art, no matter how aesthetically transformed, no matter how defended against. If tact is a virtue in these matters let us be tactful, but let us not omit the essential and even at times the obvious. I intend to go on the assumption that the personal dimension is not only useful but crucial in grasping the full nature (including the boundaries) of their achievement.

The shared vision I refer to is pervasive in Stevens but only once, so far as I am aware, does it appear at a definite moment, when we can speak not only of a common world view but of the detailed shaping of a passage of poetry. I do not claim that Proust is a major source of Stevens' art but the echo of Proust is so specific that, despite its modest occasion, it reveals in Stevens a sudden kinship that comprehends the several dimensions of reality suggested above. In fact, I would argue that the full power of Stevens' lines can be experienced only with knowledge of their Proustian source. The passage is from "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" ("It Must Change" X):

A bench was his catalepsy, Theatre
Of Trope. He sat in the park. The water of
The lake was full of artificial things,

Like a page of music, like an upper air,
Like a momentary color, in which swans
Were seraphs, were saints, were changing essences.

The west wind was the music, the motion, the force
To which the swans curveted, a will to change,
A will to make iris frettings on the blank.

(CP 397)²

Hidden in the poet's quiet reflections, probably in Elizabeth Park, reflections which serve rather to introduce a little picture than to bring something to a climax, are emotions and thoughts that Proust's novel *Remembrance of Things Past* brings to the surface. There, indeed, we find the park, the swans, the page of music, and the changing essences; and there, most significantly, we find the key to the passage in the image and idea of catalepsy.

Catalepsy in the poem is one of those obscure ideas in Stevens that initially confuses rather than clarifies meaning. It is true that, as Milton J. Bates reminds me, Stevens in his letters to Hi Simons describes "a bench as catalepsy" as "a place of trance" (L 435). This is of some consequence (see below) but in itself fails to characterize the nature of the trance. Is it (to choose among the several definitions of "trance") merely a "state of complete mental absorption" or is it an unconscious state, "characterized by suspension of sensation, muscular rigidity, and often by loss of contact with the environment"? And, if the latter, what in the poem justifies the more extreme meaning? The word in context gives an impression of arbitrariness. It hints at an image but remains merely an idea, half appealing to our understanding, very little to our emotions. In Proust's novel catalepsy is the very reverse: it fuses a complex of thought and feeling. It brings to focus a series of experiences that Swann undergoes, over a considerable period of time, in his relations with Odette and with Vinteuil's sonata. It is a capstone of Swann's life, a moment of ecstasy and revaluation that even anticipates the consummation of Proust's whole novel. Catalepsy appears at a high point in *Within a Budding Grove*, when Swann elaborates ecstatically on the final meaning for him of "the little phrase" from Vinteuil's sonata.³ However, some knowledge of the earlier stages of his feelings about the music is needed to help us understand its significance.

The ecstatic moment occurs much later in time than his affair with Odette, when the sonata first begins to intertwine itself with his romantic feelings. It must be remembered that Swann's sensibility develops in parallel stages with his response to the music. When he first hears the sonata the year before he meets Odette, its effect is to bring into "Swann's life the possibility of a sort of rejuvenation." He finds in this piece "the presence of one of those invisible realities in which he had ceased to believe" and becomes "conscious once again of a desire, almost, indeed, of the power to consecrate his life."⁴ Swann, whose life seems to be emptied of meaning, now becomes susceptible to both art and love, becomes almost totally vulnerable, for the little phrase has "obliterated all care for material interests" in the depths of his soul.⁵ He returns to work on his essay on Vermeer and he falls in love with Odette. At this second stage the little phrase becomes, "so to speak, the national anthem of their love."⁶ Yet even as it so intimately expresses his love, and just *because* it does, he regrets at the

same time that the music has a "meaning of its own, an intrinsic and unalterable beauty, foreign to themselves."⁷ It is not until the third stage that the music and his love are indissolubly linked; all the impressions associated with his love for Odette, the suffering and sweetness, are "rendered visible" by the little phrase.⁸ At the cost of temporarily losing his artistic detachment, Swann's naked and suffering soul completely submits to the music, becomes one with it, and finally purges itself of the illusion that he might realize his romantic hopes with Odette. He permits the music to teach him the truth about the vanity of his wishes and gradually regains at least his practical sanity and detachment. But he is far from able to plumb the depths of those wishes.

The fourth and final stage of Swann's attitude toward Vinteuil's sonata—the stage which is implicit in Stevens' poem—is expressed years later, with Swann long since married to an Odette with whom he is no longer in love. As Mme Swann plays a passage from the sonata, Swann describes to the young Marcel what the music now means to him:

"The moment when night is darkening among the trees, when the arpeggios of the violin call down a cooling dew upon the earth. You must admit that it is rather charming; it shows all the static side of moonlight, which is the essential part. It is not surprising that a course of radiant heat such as my wife is taking, should act on the muscles, since moonlight can prevent the leaves from stirring. That is what he expresses so well in that little phrase, the Bois de Boulogne plunged in a cataleptic trance."⁹

Marcel remarks that "this nocturnal foliage was simply that beneath whose shade in many a restaurant on the outskirts of Paris he had listened on many an evening to the little phrase. In place of the profound significance that he had so often sought in it, what it recalled now to Swann were the leafy boughs, arranged, wreathed, painted round about it . . . ; was the whole of one spring season which he had not been able to enjoy before, not having had—feverish and moody as he then was—enough strength of body and mind for its enjoyment."¹⁰ Finally Swann declares:

"It is rather charming, don't you think . . . , that sound can give a reflection, like water, or glass. It is curious, too, that Vinteuil's phrase now shows me only the things to which I paid no attention then. Of my troubles, my loves of those days it recalls nothing, it has altered all my values . . . [What] the music shows—to me, at least—is not for a moment 'Free will' or 'In Tune with the Infinite,' but shall we say old Verdurin in his frock coat in the palmhouse at the Jardin d'Acclimatation."¹¹

The stoppage of movement expresses a shift from the extraordinary, from an endless quest for impossible gratification, to ecstatic joy in what lies before one's eyes. But old Verdurin is not so much a real person here as an aesthetic object. For Swann, as for Proust, there is limited satisfaction, certainly no ecstasy, in human relationships.

Thus the four stages of Swann's responses to Vinteuil's sonata can be summed up as (1) renewed vitality; (2) romantic hope; (3) resignation; (4) contemplative lyricism. It is at the fourth stage that Swann takes a first step into the Proustian world of "changing essences,"¹² a world which resembles Stevens' "Theatre / Of Trope" in Elizabeth Park, and yet differs from it in important ways. First, although the disturbing personal relationships of Stevens' life have been left behind, so that morally Swann and Stevens are much alike, we see that Stevens (or the central figure of his poem) is enjoying his imaginative theater *while* he is sitting in the park, not in memory. Swann must both mentally return to the disturbing scene and at the same time radically distance himself from it. Second, and of greater significance, Stevens implies that the experience he is having is essentially imaginative, for he describes the things he sees in the lake as "artificial," part of an unreal "theater" of change in which everything is unreal—or at least "as unreal as real can be" (CP 468).¹³ Swann, on the other hand, and unlike Marcel at the end of the novel, because he has not fully transcended the past, merely outgrown it, does not regard his vision as an appearance but as essential reality. Despite the abandonment of his anxious love for Odette, he has not resolved his yearning for an Absolute or Fantasy Object beyond Odette. The cataleptic trance is reality for him, not the living world: it surpasses change, conflict, and desire. It is not merely the eternal aspect of change, but a world unto itself. Swann still has, as Marcel remarks, "the desire to see again," to possess the "soul," the "hidden self," of that "nocturnal foliage" which he now enjoys in memory.¹⁴ Proust is probably suggesting the incompleteness of Swann's vision, a vision which the whole novel embodies yet transcends.

Finally, and most important, Swann does not see that the roots of his new contemplative power lie in his original love for Odette, and that his old sufferings are the very source, or at least the condition of his most rewarding pleasures. He does not recognize that some of the energy of his disastrous love affair is being sublimated to spiritual uses, or that the unsublimated remainder still presses for satisfaction. His lack of anxiety is not an achieved salvation: he is unanxious by default, almost by exhaustion, not by true belief. He is clearly the "dying" Swann.¹⁵

In the poem, Stevens' ecstasy is muted by the knowledge of reality, and of imagination as distinct from reality. There is, perhaps, a hidden wryness in the statement that "A bench was his catalepsy"—no more (but no less) than a mere bench!—the all-too-human ground of the aspiring mind. And

Stevens is not only aware of the imaginative nature of the experience: in the succeeding verses he explicitly links the “volatile world” with the changing self, and the self with the flux of existence symbolized by the west wind (“the force / To which the swans curveted, a will to change”). The “water, or glass” that Swann sees in the little phrase from Vinteuil’s sonata becomes for Stevens, in the next lines of the poem, the glass of the self (the “rubblings of a glass in which we peer” [CP 398]).

But Stevens does not openly refer to the personal elements in his life that give resonance to his seat on the bench. We need Proust’s novelistic world and Stevens’ other poems to fill out what is obscurely alluded to here. In Proust the image and spiritual equivalents of catalepsy are central to the entire novel, not merely to Swann’s confused quest for meaning in life. They comprehend the poles of art and eternity in relation to life and time. The fixed beam of the liberated narrator—Marcel with his culminating insight—perpetually sheds its classical light on the romantic and distracted protagonist—Marcel locked within his vain and contradictory desires. The intersection of cataleptic vision and limited, changing perspectives creates the dazzling effects of Proust’s great novel. For Stevens, too, the unchanging vision ceaselessly conditions the joys and frustrations of the changing moment, the “ever-never-changing same” (CP 353) of each actual poem. But Stevens never resolves the dialectic of opposites in any final way. Sometimes he longs for the “bronzes” (CP 425) vision of perfection, the more-than-human “Savage Spirit” (CP 327), sometimes he demands the changing world of nature and time, the “great river this side of Stygia” (CP 533), and sometimes he searches for some sort of human balance between the two. And more than one perspective may be found in the same poem.

But it is Stevens’ longing for catalepsy that is most revealing and that serves to define his relation to Proust. From the beginning to the end of Stevens’ life in poetry we find that longing. It is openly stated in “Nuances of a Theme by Williams” and somewhat disguised in “Sunday Morning.” The poet asks Williams’ “ancient star” to “shine nakedly, shine like bronze . . . that mirrors nothing” (CP 18). And, in the grand dialectic of “Sunday Morning,” the narrating poet appears to be arguing in favor of “April’s green” and “[the woman’s] remembrance of awakened birds” (CP 68), but, through buried empathy for the woman’s yearning for more permanent satisfactions than naturalism provides—and despite the irony—indirectly hints at his own latent wish for an afterlife of perfection:¹⁶

Is there no change of death in paradise?
Does ripe fruit never fall? Or do the boughs
Hang always heavy in that perfect sky,
Unchanging, yet so like our perishing earth,
With rivers like our own that seek for seas

They never find, the same receding shores
That never touch with inarticulate pang?
(CP 69)

In the very late "Of Mere Being" the "bronze decor" reappears in a context of feeling still more chastened by a lifetime of desire denied:

A gold-feathered bird
Sings in the palm, without human meaning,
Without human feeling, a foreign song.
(OP 141)

And in "This Solitude of Cataracts," Stevens most plainly reveals his longing for an inhuman perfection:

He wanted his heart to stop beating and his mind to rest

In a permanent realization, without any wild ducks
Or mountains that were not mountains, just to know
how it would be,

Just to know how it would feel, released from destruction,
To be a bronze man breathing under archaic lapis . . .
(CP 425)

Although in this phase of Stevens' dialectic he is in quest of the eradication rather than the satisfaction of desire, the longing for catalepsy always generates or is generated by its opposite, either in other often closely related poems, or in the same poem, tacitly or openly. Helen Vendler writes of "the strange peace" of "A Postcard from the Volcano," which derives from the "cessation of all desire" and which she attributes to the fact that Stevens is taking the point of view of "one of the citizens of Pompeii buried beneath the lava of Vesuvius." Yet the drive towards passionlessness is rooted in a truly volcanic eruption of passion, now recollected in some tranquillity, "the posthumous voice of [the poet's] storming spirit":

we see the trace of the bitterness of the still-living author of the poem in his vision of his own life and desiring spirit degenerated to that empty and dirty house in a gutted world . . .¹⁷

The latent wish for an immortality without the pains of desire is still clearer in "The Snow Man," which culminates in the ambivalent freedom of an atheistic nirvana. The snow man is a cataleptic ideal pushed just over the bounds of our humanity. The trick is to allow it to condition without destroying our existence, to "attempt to numb, while not annihilating, the senses."¹⁸

Further analysis of catalepsy in both writers suggests that it does not merely generate or imply its opposite: it also, I believe, *contains* it. The apparently desexualized, visionary calm of Stevens' "A bench was his catalepsy," and the Proustian "static quality" of the "cataleptic trance" not only suggest freedom from sexual excitement, "the strange peace" of living death, but a strange sexuality as well. The evidence for this comes from the culture of art and letters and from psychoanalytic psychiatry. The traditional association of sexual climax with death (for Elizabethans, particularly), and the special quality of nineteenth century "decadent" thought, contribute to our appreciation of this linkage of polar opposites. Proust, surely, and Stevens, probably, read J.-K. Huysmans' *A rebours* (1884), a Bible for the "decadent" 1890s.¹⁹ Huysmans' novel was the outcome of nineteenth-century French literary culture descending from Baudelaire and the latter's "revolt against conventional ideas of the beauty of Nature."²⁰ Huysmans praises Baudelaire for his achievement in reaching "those districts of the soul where the monstrous vegetations of the sick mind flourish" and carries his experiments in "evil" further with the more explicit sexuality of *A rebours*, where the hero, Des Esseintes, engages in "unnatural loves and perverse pleasures" in a desperate craving for gratifications that end in complete disillusionment with the things of this world.²¹ There is a line of development from Poe to Baudelaire to Huysmans of increasing openness of expression—without full naturalistic explicitness—of abnormal sexuality. Poe's baroque and circuitous style muffles the sexual nature of the incestuous passions of the twins, Roderick and Madeline, in "The Fall of the House of Usher." Madeline is said to be the victim of a mysterious disease, described as "of a partially cataleptic character," that is the polar opposite of Roderick's. She is as desensitized as he is overly sensitive to stimuli. But, finally, in her apparent return from the grave, her powerful passions break free from inhibition and repression and—like the "ponderous and ebony," jaw-like doors of the enormous room into which she bursts—she devours the fearful Roderick.²²

Baudelaire's bloody visions of castrating females, serpents, and vampires who suck the marrow out of his bones, are brought to fruition by Huysmans in the fantasies of Des Esseintes. A particularly intoxicating moment occurs as the latter broods on one of the "masterpieces" of the art of Gustave Moreau, his picture of Salome, a figure who "had been an obsession with him for years."

In Gustave Moreau's work, which in conception went far beyond the data supplied by the New Testament, Des Esseintes saw realized at long last the weird and superhuman Salome of his dreams. Here she was no longer just the dancing-girl who extorts a cry of lust and lechery from an old man by the lascivious movements of her loins . . . She had become, as it were,

the symbolic incarnation of undying Lust, the Goddess of immortal Hysteria, the accursed Beauty exalted above all other beauties by the catalepsy that hardens her flesh and steels her muscles, the monstrous Beast, indifferent, irresponsible, insensible, poisoning, like the Helen of ancient myth, everything that approaches her, everything that sees her, everything that she touches.²³

Some further assistance in our understanding of catalepsy as a metaphor comes from psychoanalytic psychiatry, where a consideration of it in its extreme psychotic form helps us to grasp the metaphor in Proust and Stevens of certain intense, probably sexual, experiences of normal life. Otto Fenichel, in his encyclopedic study of neurosis, describes the profound oppositional character of catalepsy, a central symptom of catatonic schizophrenia. "Catatonic rigidity," he writes, broadly speaking, "reflects a conflict between the impulse to act and the defense against it." He also writes that:

A restitutional striving toward the lost objective world [the world of the infantile parental imagoes] is the root of many catatonic symptoms . . . [Further, autocastrations in schizophrenic cases] are psychologically comparable to autocastrations performed by religious fanatics who, by such radical denial of their active sexual wishes, try to regain "peaceful unity with God," that is, an extreme passive submissiveness, less of a feminine than of an early infantile "oceanic" nature . . . [A]cts of this kind are performed in states of deep regression . . . in which instinctual gratification and defense against instincts are still one and the same. Such archaic goals reappear in states of regression more easily if the sphere of the superego has been sexualized.²⁴

Without suggesting that either Stevens or Proust can be readily placed within Fenichel's imposing categories, it seems to me that an appreciation of the two-sided character of catalepsy, its sexual and antisexual quality, is helpful in our understanding of the forces at work in both writers. In Stevens the possible sexual reference in the passage before us supplements the gentle irony already mentioned with a new irony—a bench was his orgasm, nothing but a bench!—yet a hint of the primal excitement may remain, and certainly is suggested in the poems already discussed that reveal the cataleptic state of mind—"Sunday Morning," "Nuances of a Theme by Williams," "A Postcard from the Volcano," "The Snow Man," and "This Solitude of Cataracts." Spiritual climax replaces sexual climax without entirely losing the quality of sexuality: nothingness is transformed

from emptiness to orgasm, from a mere nothing to “the nothing that is” (CP 10).

The quest for catalepsy in both Stevens and Proust is rooted in meta-physical and personal despair, almost a medieval otherworldliness in the midst of modernity. It stems from a wish to escape from the limits of our condition with a disenchanting recognition of its impossibility. The dialectic of their art, the sense of completeness and incompleteness that it gives us, are two of the noblest versions that we have of the modernist realization of victory in defeat, defeat in victory. It has always been easy to see this in Proust's novel and Stevens' poetry. But the source of that despair in their personal lives, the specific and acute sense of despair at human love, which is so clear in Proust, is obscure or hidden in Stevens. Proust's novel is a transparent exhibition of his personal life and the values by which he lived, and his life was in clear service to his art. Stevens' art is a shadowy expression of his life and his life seems a walking shadow of his art. Or at least until recently. Because so much is now known about Stevens' life, we can read many of the poems in the light of the biography and appreciate the personal roots of those often abstract and ambiguous statements.²⁵

Even obvious allusions to Stevens' marriage, as in “Le Monocle de Mon Oncle” and “World without Peculiarity,” were ignored by critics years ago. Perhaps it seemed an intrusion on the awesome privacy that Stevens had constructed for himself. But the accumulation of biographical materials has changed our perspective, although it is still difficult and controversial to pin down specific personal references, particularly to the central relationship with his wife. And even when the references seem plausible, what exactly to do with them is still a question.

There was a moment during the early thirties in Stevens' poetic development when the personal dimension was particularly visible, a moment when the codas to *Harmonium* were complete and *Ideas of Order* were being created. As A. Walton Litz writes, Stevens never republished two of the intensely personal poems of this period (“Good Man, Bad Woman” and “The Woman Who Blamed Life on a Spaniard”) which, like the earlier “Red Loves Kit,” fail to maintain the aesthetic distance Stevens thought appropriate for himself as poet.²⁶ But there were larger issues here. Stevens was not only struggling with his aesthetic defenses: he was struggling with the whole set of his life defenses, groping to adapt to a life without conjugal love. He had abandoned poetry for a few years in a final attempt to commit himself to family life with the new baby (born in 1924). But the temporary father-daughter closeness did not heal the fundamental husband-wife breach.²⁷ By the mid-thirties Stevens had abandoned all hope of love and turned his face towards alternative gratifications. Poetry became his “sweet substitute” (in the words of a jazz number of the time). It was a period of “farewells,” of *Ideas of Order*, which one might call an early

version of *The Auroras of Autumn*, that great chronicle of desiccation, deprivation, and loss. Farewells were nothing really new for Stevens, who was always turning from one season to another (from summer to winter), from the past of Christian belief to a present of skepticism and naturalism, from a private to a more public world. But this period was especially one of separation and, most fundamentally, I believe, an emotional separation from his wife.

One would think that a quarter century of a dead or dying marriage would already have suggested "farewell" to Stevens. But the need for farewell did not (and perhaps never did) end, probably because the deep attachment was still there and needed to be denied. Finally, Stevens' reconstruction of his defenses required a new intensity of idealization, a further desexualization of primal instincts, as compensation for what was lost. "Farewell to Florida" may not be as perfect a prelude to *Ideas of Order* as "The Sun This March,"²⁸ but it contains the *aims* of Stevens' new phase of life and art: it is a prelude to the remainder of his life and work. It cries out in a swirl of rhetoric for that impossible possibility of desexualization, a leap from passion to catalepsy. In "O Florida, Venereal Soil" (1922), there had been suggested the mere *possibility* of escaping from the torment of Florida through a civilized sublimation:

you might sit,
A scholar of darkness,
Sequestered over the sea,
Wearing a clear tiara
Of red and blue and red,
Sparkling, solitary, still,
In the high sea-shadow.
(CP 48)

But in "Farewell to Florida" the *imperative* of high confidence is directed to the ship of the self, which is instructed to "Go on through the darkness" and break the sensual bonds of that "sepulchral South," "the wilderness / Of waving weeds" and "the vivid blooms." The difficulties of sublimation, of becoming "A scholar of darkness," are evaded by separation from the dangers of sexuality.

To stand here on the deck in the dark and say
Farewell and to know that that land is forever gone
And that she will not follow in any word
Or look, nor ever again in thought, except
That I loved her once . . . Farewell. Go on, high ship.
(CP 118)

Is it possible that sensual Florida, which was originally an *alternative* to Stevens' relationship with his prim and fearful wife, was also associated with his wife? I think so. There is no evidence that Stevens ever acted on his sexual fantasies, despite many opportunities in his travels.²⁹ His bond with his wife was so strong that his sexual fantasies were deeply, if not exclusively, linked to her. Just as the interior paramour, that idealized female image of Reality lodged in the poet's mind, was both an alternative defensive construction to his unavailable spouse and yet remained the spouse herself,³⁰ so the dark "donna" (CP 48) of Florida was both an escape from his cold wife and an embodiment of her imagined sexuality. Had he not, in a relatively late, desperate wish (in "Two Figures in Dense Violet Light"), asked his wife to "Be the voice of night and Florida in my ear" (CP 86)? The difference was that the hand of the sexual spouse—"A hand that bears a thick-leaved fruit" (CP 48)—was more threatening than the "moist hand" (CP 85) of the nonsexual one, and so the latter could be allowed to serve the meals and dust the furniture and sleep in a distant wing of the house.

Thus Stevens recognizes that the "wintry slime" of the cold North binds him "round" as much as the "bleaching sand" of the South, but the North, he thinks, means life and freedom while the "sepulchral South" means death. The ecstasy of the North develops the nothingness theme of "The Snow Man" and from then on becomes the central theme of Stevens' poetry. Is it a desexualized ecstasy? It tries to be. But the affirmations of "Farewell to Florida" are born of negations, of castrations ("My North is leafless") more than sublimations, self-disgust, sometimes, rather than true liberation: the goal is cataleptic ecstasy with its hidden sexuality—restitutional striving toward the lost world of infantile objects.

Stevens' struggle to liberate himself during this period is expressed in continuing interior conflict. The personal note shows through at the very beginning of his new social concern. "This mangled, smutted semi-world hacked out / Of dirt" (CP 119) is both the world of Stevens' marriage and the whole modern world (and possibly any earthly world at all). And the "mansion" of the marriage is seen from the point of view of a later time, or of death itself ("A Postcard from the Volcano"), as a place with

A spirit storming in blank walls,

A dirty house in a gutted world . . .

(CP 159)

One is reminded of Eliot's later remarks about his personal reasons for writing *The Waste Land*, that to him the poem was "only the relief of a personal and wholly insignificant grouse against life . . . just a piece of rhythmical grumbling."³¹ The difference, of course, is that under the pressure of desire Stevens lived without a sustaining religious belief (until,

perhaps, his reported conversion on his deathbed), and in middle age disguised what Vendler terms his “catastrophic loss of feeling, a fear of unleashed libido with no conceivable object, and the despair of a mind of genius that has nothing more to think about.”³² The ironic title, “Gallant Château,” refers to the same “dirty house” of “A Postcard,” only now the focus is on the empty bed. The poet concludes his “empty bed blues” with another variation on catalepsy, a sad celebration of nullity as preferable to “tragic hair, / Bitter eyes, hands hostile and cold”:

It is good. The bed is empty,
The curtains are stiff and prim and still.
(CP 161)³³

For both Stevens and Proust art was their “sweet substitute” for love, “the wild poem” their “substitute / For the woman one loves or ought to love, / One wild rhapsody a fake for another” (CP 241). Both writers accepted, even loved, the rhythms of change and loss in a Romantic and Bergsonian way, as Plato could never do, but both were fundamentally Platonists in their disillusionment with attachments to living persons. They were more resigned to the failure of love in this world than the Romantics. They would have accepted Marvell’s “Definition of Love” as “begotten by despair / Upon Impossibility”; and still more fundamentally they shared Marvell’s pleasure in retreating temporarily from “passion’s heat” (which is too close to the Oedipal wish), to a primal garden where “man . . . walked without a mate.”³⁴ For Stevens and Proust, essence is finally more valuable than existence, “the smell and taste of things,” indeed, “more persistent, more faithful” than people,³⁵ catalepsy finally more valuable than life and change.

Two Paradises 'twere in one
To live in Paradise alone.
(Marvell, “The Garden”)

Proust and Stevens build their fictive paradises on despair and fear: despair and fear of recovery of the lost object of love, despair and fear of attachment to any present human alternatives to that first attachment. Each finds his way to cope in fantasy and art with loss. Proust celebrates the lost object of love in many guises. There is the guise of Madame Swann walking:

it was . . . from the glorious zenith of her ripe and still so fragrant summer that [she], majestic, smiling, kind, as she advanced along the Avenue du Bois, saw like Hypatia, beneath the slow tread of her feet, worlds revolving.³⁶

And even the guise of his own mother kissing him good night:

when she bent her loving face down over my bed, and held it out to me like a Host, for an act of Communion in which my lips might drink deeply the sense of her real presence, and with it the power to sleep.³⁷

Proust is directly in touch with the lost object and able, finally, to separate from it. Stevens, even in his last phase needs more real disguises; he needs to reconstitute the maternal object beyond Elsie in "Forms of farewell" (CP 482) that are further from the original source. In this respect he is more like the never truly satisfied Swann—in Swann's demand for the fantasy object beyond Odette and in Swann's final inability to accept the life of contemplation as the Greatest Good—than he is like Proust. (Perhaps, indeed, as he sat in Elizabeth Park, Stevens saw in Swann's relationship with Odette something of his own relationship with Elsie.) It is true that he can write easily of the "goodness of lying in a maternal sound" (CP 482); and occasionally he seems to be alluding to his actual mother, as in Section III of "The Auroras of Autumn":

The mother's face,
The purpose of the poem, fills the room.
(CP 413)

But generally, despite (or, perhaps, because of) his Proustian responsiveness to the "'Women invisible in music and motion and color'" (CP 241) that lie behind the "seemings" of things, his objects of love are less concrete, more subjective than Proust's. Perhaps, therefore, separation from the Mother imago was more difficult for Stevens, whose "hating woman" always lived in the same house with him, than for Proust, whose parents were dead by the time he was launched on his great work.³⁸

Proust confronts and partly resolves his Oedipal conflict in transparent language, whereas Stevens, even in his late noble and lucent rhythms, is dark and roundabout concerning his concealed subject. His fantasies and feelings concerning his wife (and, more obscurely, his mother) are always his primary subject, but they are embodied differently over the three periods of his artistic life. The differences are revealed in each period through the nature and degree of his defenses. In the first period Stevens is fully involved in the relationship with his wife and the defenses are massive. The comic persona and the richness of rhetoric and imagery are central during this period, the snow man's plain statement peripheral. In the second he is saying farewell to her, but with difficulty. He cannot make the interior break.

She was a shadow as thin in memory
As an autumn ancient underneath the snow,
Which one recalls at a concert or in a café.
(CP 154)

The imagery of late fall and winter, of catalepsy, coldness, and desiccation is central, that of summer peripheral. His repose, when it is that, is often acquired at the cost of abandoning the human and embracing—and being embraced by—the inhuman, the penetrating “odor / Of earth”:

The thought that he had found all this
Among men, in a woman—she caught his breath—
But he came back as one comes back from the sun
To lie on one’s bed in the dark, close to a face
Without eyes or mouth, that looks at one and speaks.
(CP 237)³⁹

In the last period, when Stevens has achieved more exquisite directness of statement than ever before, the interior break has been made but the new life of separation is at once satisfactory and unsatisfactory. This is the period of both spiritual joy and spiritual emptiness, the bronzen character structure acting not only as a defense but also as a mode of adaptation. Desexualized feeling for a desexualized paramour is permitted as long as it stays within the boundaries of despair, i.e., as long as the second-best character of the compromise formation is recognized as only second best.

The difference between the middle and late periods (and the connection between them) can be seen if we compare “Ghosts as Cocoons” (1936), a poem of the middle period, with “Large Red Man Reading” (1948), one of the finest of Stevens’ consummatory poems, but which still retains the conflicts of his earlier life. Vendler’s explication of “Ghosts as Cocoons” as one of Stevens’ love-hate poems is particularly useful in preparing the reader to grasp not only the freedom but the masked ambivalence of “Large Red Man Reading.” She describes the poem as a “violent prayer” in which “he asks that the ghost of an old murdered love become the cocoon of a new love.”⁴⁰ The “new love” cannot be found in “This mangled, smutted semi-world hacked out / Of dirt” (CP 119), but in the full world of the large red man where the “pans [are] above the stove, the pots on the table, the tulips among them” (CP 423). In “Ghosts as Cocoons” Stevens still seems to be desperately hoping for a worldly, not an interior change in his life; the tone is that of the distracted protagonist in Proust, not that of the liberated narrator. But in “Large Red Man Reading” the desperate hoping has become an eternal yearning, a yearning apparently not of the poet but of the ghosts themselves. Their yearning is balanced and contained by the spiritual (and remotely sexual) satisfactions of the poem as a whole. Their wish “to step barefoot into reality” is controlled by the “large red man,” the poet’s intelligence—“The outlines of being and its expressings, the syllables of its law”—which imposes the tragic truth of the separation of self and other on the ghosts’ demand for mystic oneness, their urge to break out of their own skin and fuse with objects,

Which in those ears and in those thin, those spended hearts,
Took on color, took on shape and the size of things as
they are
And spoke the feeling for them, which was what they
had lacked.⁴¹

(CP 424)

But the resolution of dissatisfactions is not complete in Stevens as it is in Proust. For Proust there is no ambiguity or irony about the ideal satisfactions of the liberated narrator. The double vision is final, in an almost medieval sense. For Stevens there is still what one might term another dimension of despair beyond Proust's: the sense of not having as opposed to having, a latent dissatisfaction with the condition of separation from ultimate reality ("the dumbfounding abyss / Between us and the object" [CP 437]). As Alan D. Perlis writes in his discussion of "Large Red Man Reading":

The last (and longest) sentence of the poem is entirely premised on what "would have" happened if a large man could have actually superimposed "the great blue tabulae," the catalogue of "things as they are," upon the alphabet of tropes. But nothing actually happens in the poem beyond the expression of the poet's own belated hope.⁴²

This despair is a branch of that deep despair (and fear) which I have discussed above, the despair with intimate relationships. It makes the reader feel, when irony is preserved, both satisfied and dissatisfied at the same time. It forces us to reflect that Stevens' maturity of vision (with a few important exceptions) is never complete, even in the late poems, and that unresolved tensions from the past, brought perhaps by the ghosts themselves (the parental imagoes? the "ghost" of the "old murdered love"?), break in to haunt the poet the way unsuccessful repressions break in to haunt the dreaming self.

It is of course not true that "nothing happens" in the poem. The intensity of awareness happens. The ghosts do in a sense step barefoot into reality but not in the way they "would have wept to." They experience *symbolic* union with the ordinary objects of life, not the literal union that they are after. But the poet in his entire being is not convinced by his own intelligence, by the tragic limits which the poem itself imposes, of the impossibility of oneness. The latent urge, unwilling to remain merely within a "quagmire of language,"⁴³ erupts in the form of a "belated hope" of fusion. Part of the intensity of figurative fusion comes from the hidden wish for an actual fusion. One might say that there is a slight, sentimental extra beneath the poem's dominant classical control.

Both Proust and Stevens are in despair at intimate relations, but the despair reveals itself differently in each writer. Proust's ideal self, embodied in the liberated narrator, is free from all inner conflict, neurotic or even healthy. He surveys the human scene with maximum joy and without illusions: he completes the stunted possibilities of the life of the distracted protagonist. The despair I speak of comes through in the implicit personal and social values of the novel, in the standard of maturity that is being used to judge the successes and failures of the protagonist and the other characters. Normal marriage, normal family life, normal heterosexual love are all outside the scope of Proust's vision. They are too close to some version of the family romance. He is even in despair at homosexual intimacy. Although his novel speaks to and for all human beings and even refrains from attributing the author's own primarily homosexual orientation to his hero in order to serve centrality and universality, the disguise is not always convincing. The vision is skewed, as of course it must be, by the boundaries of Proust's own sexuality.⁴⁴

Stevens' despair expresses itself differently. He is unable to create a lasting ideal self from which all human experience is viewed. He has no sooner mounted that peak, even projected a partial perspective from above, than, too often, even in his final period, he must come down, he must undermine it with irony, ambiguity, and skepticism—or just by “a plain sense of things” (*CP* 502):

He turned from the tower to the house,
 From the spun sky and the high and deadly view,
 To the novels on the table,
 The geraniums on the sill.

He could understand the things at home.
 And being up high had helped him when up high,
 As if on a taller tower
 He would be certain to see

That, in the shadowless atmosphere,
 The knowledge of things lay round but unperceived:
 The height was not quite proper;
 The position was wrong.

It was curious to have to descend
 And, seated in the nature of his chair,
 To feel the satisfactions
 Of that transparent air.

(*CP* 493)

Stevens' desire for and his fear of cataleptic perfection are so great that he cannot master the contradictions they generate. There are exceptions to this, of course, such as "To an Old Philosopher in Rome," but generally, as Vendler declares, "Hunger, for Stevens, is our eternal condition: famished for fulfillment, we achieve it uncertainly and not for long, but radiantly nonetheless."⁴⁵ Perhaps that helps to explain why Stevens avoids major concerns with family and social life, and with history. He cannot, like Proust, move confidently under the auspices of the ideal into an opulent diversity of experiences. He is forever bound to his own inward conflict, wanting desperately to live a normal married life and being unable to, afraid to. Yet he refuses to abandon the ideal of full sexual development. He moves constantly from the cataleptic to the ordinary and back again, endlessly. Proust happily, or at least with much less regret, turns away from a standard middle class ideal as well as a biological model of full sexual development, and yet becomes capable of sharing in many other dimensions of the human, all filled with that marvelous unanxious vision of perfection. That comprehensiveness and that final simplicity define Proust's greatness. Stevens' greatness is more difficult to specify.

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Notes

¹See Helen Vendler, *Wallace Stevens: Words Chosen Out of Desire* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986). Vendler writes that generally "criticism has avoided the evidences" of Stevens' private life, "but it is, as [James] Merrill says, so inseparable from the incomparable style invented to express it that it is a failure of imagination to discuss the style without its subject" (28).

²Passages cited in the text are abbreviated as follows: *CP*—*The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Knopf, 1954); *L*—*Letters of Wallace Stevens*, ed. Holly Stevens (New York: Knopf, 1966); *OP*—*Opus Posthumous*, ed. Milton J. Bates (New York: Knopf, 1989).

³*Within a Budding Grove, Remembrance of Things Past*, trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff and F. A. Blossom, 7 vols. (New York: Random House, 1922-1932), II, 148-49. Whether Stevens read Proust in French or in translation, or both, is hard to say. He knew French well and was always in touch with the French literary world, and it is possible that he did read part or all of the novel in the original. The only direct evidence we have is that, according to Holly Stevens, he owned and cherished a copy of the Scott Moncrieff translation. In a letter to me (July 25, 1973) Ms. Stevens wrote that he placed such a "high value" on the Chatto & Windus edition, translated by Moncrieff (published in 1922, with the "Time Regained" section trans. by Stephen Hudson), that "he was once almost unwilling to let me borrow" it. She does not "remember seeing Proust in French around the house," although "he may well have had it in French at one time: he often disposed of books when he ran out of shelf room." In addition, many books were disposed of after his death without record. Ms. Stevens informs me (in a recent letter dated July 30, 1990) that the Proust translation has just been acquired by the Huntington Library, together with other volumes in Stevens' library, and all are "in the process of being catalogued. They were not in the original arrangement because my father did not make notes in them: or, if he did, we didn't find them then (1972-4)."

The single direct statement by Stevens on Proust in print (in a letter to José Rodríguez Feo) is less persuasive than Stevens' own poetic practice, but it may be quoted in corroboration: "The only really interesting thing about Proust that I have seen recently is something that concerned him as a poet. It seems like a revelation, but it is quite possible to say that that is exactly what he was and perhaps all that he was. He saw life on many levels, but what he wrote was always on the poetic level on which he and you and I live" (L 575).

Finally, I am indebted to Bates for a reference to the fascinating title from Stevens' notebook, *From Pieces of Paper*, but never used: "A Pre-Proustian Past." See George Lensing, *Wallace Stevens: A Poet's Growth* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986), 176. See below for my own deductions from internal evidence about which version or versions of Proust Stevens read.

⁴*Swann's Way, Remembrance of Things Past*, I, 300-02.

⁵*Swann's Way*, 340.

⁶*Swann's Way*, 312.

⁷*Swann's Way*, 313.

⁸*Swann's Way*, 501.

⁹*Within a Budding Grove*, 148-49. The French original of the key phrase in this passage, "le Bois de Boulogne tombé en catalepsie," suggests to me the possibility that Stevens did indeed read it in French (cf. "A bench was his catalepsy"). See *A la recherche du temps perdu*, eds. Pierre Clarac and André Ferre, 3 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1954), I, 533. On the other hand, the reference to "trance" surely implies that Stevens read the translation, at least in part, since only Moncrieff employs that word and that is how Stevens himself defines catalepsy for Hi Simons (L 435, see above). How fascinating that the word chosen for the poem suggests the French, while the prose definition suggests the English.

¹⁰*Within a Budding Grove*, 149.

¹¹*Within a Budding Grove*, 150.

¹²The "changing essences" in themselves do not change. Each is uniquely and eternally itself; but as the flux of existence changes a new quality or character or essence appears to the observer on the bench. The flux is symbolized by the "west wind," Shelley's "Destroyer and preserver," mere appearance to Plato, ineluctable reality to Santayana and Stevens—the natural source of essences that free the mind or, better, that stand ready spiritually to gratify a mind that has already achieved its freedom in some natural way.

Stevens probably acquired the notion of "essences" from Santayana, who was such a strong influence on Stevens in many other ways (although the same notion can be found in Husserl and Whitehead); it is a modernist reworking of the old Platonic and medieval doctrine of eternal forms. (See George Santayana, *The Realm of Essence* [New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1927].) Proust himself hardly ever uses the term "essence," and when he does it is in the singular, as in "the essence of things" ("l'essence de choses"). Santayana briefly discusses the similarities between his own view of essences and Proust's in his essay, "Proust on Essences," published originally in *Life and Letters* (June, 1929), II, 455-59, and reprinted in *Obiter Scripta* (London: Constable, 1936), 206-11.

¹³See Mary Arensberg's linguistic reading of this passage in "'Spinning its Eccentric Measure': Stevens' 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,'" *The Wallace Stevens Journal* 11, 2 (1987): 112-14. Arensberg's approach is quite different from that of the present essay, but her conclusion that catalepsy suggests an epiphany of nothingness, an awareness of the unreal at the moment of insight, reinforces my own angle of vision.

¹⁴*Within a Budding Grove*, 149.

¹⁵Another parallel between Proust's novel and Stevens' poem is that Proust too plays upon Swann's name, but in relation to Tchaikovsky's ballet *Swan Lake*, in which an Odette is the central figure. The "water of the lake" in Elizabeth Park contains real swans which then become the Swann of *Swann's Way*. In an earlier poem, "Academic Discourse at Havana" (CP 142-45), Stevens paints a similar scene in a park where the "bills of the swans are flat upon the ground." But these "perished swans" do not appear to allude to Proust's "dying" Swann.

¹⁶Cf. Jay Dougherty, "Stevens' Mother and 'Sunday Morning,'" *The Wallace Stevens Journal* 10 (Fall 1986): 100-06.

¹⁷Vendler, 33ff.

¹⁸Vendler, 47.

¹⁹One of the models for Des Esseintes, the central figure of *A rebours*, was Comte Robert de Montesquiou, the fantastic dandy and eccentric, who also provided some of the inspiration for Proust's Charlus. See Robert Baldick, *The Life of J.-K. Huysmans* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1955), 80-81. The influence of *A rebours* was enormous: "For every outraged literary critic who condemned the novel there were a hundred admiring readers, who like Paul Valéry . . . made it their 'Bible and bedside book'" (Baldick 87). George Moore declared that "'a page of Huysmans is as a dose of opium, a glass of something exquisite and spirituous'" (88).

²⁰See Baldick, 82.

²¹Quoted in Baldick, 85, 80.

²²Edgar Allan Poe, *The Fall of the House of Usher and Other Tales* (New York: New American Library, 1980), 119, 130.

²³J.-K. Huysmans, *Against Nature*, trans. Robert Baldick (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1959), 65-66.

²⁴Otto Fenichel, *The Psychoanalytic Theory of Neurosis* (New York: Norton, 1945), 437-39.

²⁵See Milton J. Bates, *Wallace Stevens: A Mythology of Self* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); Peter Brazeau, *Parts of a World: Wallace Stevens Remembered* (New York: Random House, 1983); Joan Richardson, *Wallace Stevens, A Biography: The Early Years, 1879-1923* (New York: William Morrow, 1986), and *The Later Years, 1923-1955* (New York: William Morrow, 1988).

²⁶See A. Walton Litz, *Introspective Voyager: The Poetic Development of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 170. The beginning of this period might be extended backward to 1924, especially if all three poems were written together, as suggested by Litz and Samuel French Morse (*Wallace Stevens: Poetry as Life* [New York: Pegasus, 1970]), and noted by Bates in his edition of *Opus Posthumous* (New York: Knopf, 1989), 321.

²⁷See Richardson, *The Later Years*, 126-27.

²⁸See Litz, 168.

²⁹See Bates, 81, and Brazeau, 79.

³⁰See Bates, 82.

³¹T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land: A Facsimile and Transcript of the Original Drafts Including the Annotations of Ezra Pound*, ed. and intro. Valerie Eliot (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971), 1.

³²Vendler, 15.

³³Cf. Frank Doggett, *Stevens' Poetry of Thought* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1966), 128-29. In his comment on this poem, Doggett, usually a sensitive reader of Stevens, illustrates the problem of interpreting him abstractly without any reference to the personal element. He sees the poem as embodying the poet's search for some sort of meaning in the sleep of death and finding nothingness, which the poet

suggests is superior to “the tragic hair, bitter eyes, and hostile hands” of “a perpetual inimical existence.” The strain in this interpretation derives from failure to note the simple fact that, despite its difficulties, Stevens prefers an empty bed to a hostile wife (the “hating woman” [CP 454]) sharing it with him. But Doggett’s comment was written over twenty years ago when biographical information was limited. See Richardson, *The Later Years*, 125-26.

³⁴See Jim Swan, “At Play in the Garden of Ambivalence: Andrew Marvell and the Green World,” *The Practice of Psychoanalytic Criticism*, ed. L. Tennenhouse (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1976), 192. Swan writes that the central stanzas of “The Garden” fearfully banish an adult “aggressive, genital sexuality” and replace it with a playful “passive oral sexuality,” but one that is experienced anxiously and ambivalently. See also my essay: “Wallace Stevens: The Concealed Self,” *The Wallace Stevens Journal* 12 (Fall, 1988): 83-101. Quotations from Marvell are from *The Poems & Letters of Andrew Marvell*, ed. H. M. Margoliouth (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927), I, 36, 49.

³⁵*Swann’s Way*, 65. See also Proust’s description of the lime-flower tea that his bed-ridden aunt Léonie gave to Marcel as a child, the memory of which returns to him in later life as he tastes the madeleine dipped in tea offered by his mother. Those “were indeed real lime-blossoms,” which he himself saw “coming [to Combray] from the train, in the Avenue de la Gare,” but now “grown old,” having been plucked “before their flowering-time,” which “the chemist’s package had embalmed on warm evenings of spring.” As the boy would taste the tea, “deadened in the diminished life which was now theirs, and which may be called the twilight of a flower,” his aunt “would relish the savour of dead or faded blossom” (71-72). Although the neurotic Aunt Léonie is not the best standard for the full flowering of the life of contemplation, she is an important alter-ego of the bed-ridden author, and Marcel’s memories are intertwined with her rituals and obsessions.

³⁶*Within a Budding Grove*, 304.

³⁷*Swann’s Way*, 17.

³⁸See George D. Painter, *Proust: The Later Years* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1965), 71, 146.

³⁹The explicit reference to his wife here may also *covertly* allude to the bronze bust of Elsie that Stevens commissioned Adolph A. Weinman to make from the winning design for the Mercury dime and the Liberty half-dollar of 1916, and which was displayed in the Stevens household in Hartford (L 155 and Plate IX). This is more evident earlier in the poem (“Yellow Afternoon” [CP 236]) where Stevens writes of

the mute, the final sculpture
Around which silence lies on silence.
This reposes alike in springtime
And, arbored and bronzed, in autumn.

In addition to the sculpted Elsie, and the terrible silence of their relationship, Stevens may also have had in mind here a Brancusi-like (or Modigliani-like) sculpture as a model of the earth itself. The “face / Without eyes or mouth, that looks at one and speaks,” wordlessly, might then be more than the horrific, ghostly skull (with holes for mouth and eyes) that I first saw in this figure: it might be an eternal, sculpted face transcending a merely Gothic fantasy of Elsie. A recent exhibition of “Masterpieces of Cycladic Art” in New York suggests the ancient sources of what Stevens might have had in mind. Buried in the earth for 5000 years, Cycladic idols have powerfully affected the modern movement in the arts. These “eyeless, mouthless . . . idols,” probably female nature divinities from ancient Greece, were first thought of as primitive and ugly by 19th century Western viewers. The white marble figures, mostly of women with their arms folded against their chests, were once painted, and on some figures “ghost lines” remain where once were painted eyes and mouths. They are usually displayed vertically,

but one owner of several of them, Leonard Stern, once arranged his figures, as they were originally intended to be, horizontally (as in a cemetery), but found problems with this. "It's a jolting feeling . . . I find it mystically and intellectually stimulating. But I don't get the same pleasure looking at them." Another owner, George Lois, tried the same thing and found that, "If you . . . laid them down you would sink to your knees. They certainly have some divine power to transport one. But I have trouble genuflecting." See Rita Reif, *Arts and Leisure, The New York Times* (March 25, 1990): 38. In his uncanny way, Stevens saw and felt these sculptures, or something like them, lying horizontally next to him in his lonely bed, in his "mangled, smutted semi-world [his "Gallant Château"] hacked out / Of dirt."

⁴⁰Vendler, 54.

⁴¹This concluding tercet of Stevens' poem seems to echo the great central passage of Proust's novel, in which Marcel describes the consequences of his response to the taste of the madeleine dipped in tea. In a single sentence he tells us, and makes us feel, that a whole world, not merely a personal fantasy, has come into being:

And just as the Japanese amuse themselves by filling a porcelain bowl with water and steeping in it little crumbs of paper which until then are without character or form, but, the moment they become wet, stretch themselves and bend, take on colour and distinctive shape, become flowers or houses or people, permanent and recognizable, so in that moment all the flowers in our garden and in M. Swann's park, and the water-lilies on the Vivonne and the good folk of the village and their little dwellings and the parish church and the whole of Combray and its surroundings, taking their proper shapes and growing solid, sprang into being, town and gardens alike, from my cup of tea. (*Swann's Way* 66)

This passage contains three phrases that, together with the previous tercet, Stevens' lines seem to echo: (a) "take on color and distinctive shape," (b) "taking their proper shapes and growing solid," and (c) "sprang into being." But do they echo the translation more than the French original? Even the "s" sounds are in the French: (a) "se colorent, se différencient," (b) "prend forme et solidité," and (c) "est sorti" (*A la recherche*, I, 47). Yet all told it appears to me that Stevens made at least some use of the Scott Moncrieff translation.

⁴²Alan D. Perlis, "Wallace Stevens' Reader Poems and the Effacement of Metaphor," *The Wallace Stevens Journal* 10 (Fall 1986): 68-69.

⁴³See Perlis, 69.

⁴⁴See John Weightman, *The New York Review of Books* (Jan. 18, 1990), 12. Weightman believes, correctly, I think, that Proust "never experienced any fusion of personality, whatever the nature of his sexual encounters . . . All the indications are that he looked upon homosexuality as an affliction to be endured, not as a source of either guilt or pride." But Weightman understates the effect that Proust's view of intimate relations has on the conceptual framework of the entire novel.

⁴⁵Vendler, 30.

Stevens and the War Elegy

JAHAN RAMAZANI

IN HIS POETRY OF THE FIRST and second world wars, Stevens both retreats from history and represents it.¹ From the early "Phases" to the mature "Dutch Graves in Bucks County" and "Esthétique du Mal," his war elegies bear out his assertions that the poet has no "social" or "political" or "moral obligation," since they are not poems of political protest; but because they meditate on the political catastrophe of war, they also complicate these assertions (NA 27-28).² Wilfred Owen, a war elegist more intent on flaunting the brutal experience of combat, writes in his famous draft preface that his "elegies are to this generation in no sense consolatory. They may be to the next. All a poet can do today is warn."³ Stevens' war elegies, in contrast, are less historically responsive than Owen's because they seek to console and not to warn, despite the ambiguity over *whom* they would console—the poet himself, an élite, soldiers, contemporary mourners, or future generations. At times Stevens even disclaims any wish "to console" (CP 389) or "comfort" (NA 29). But during World War II he also says that the poet's "role . . . is to help people to live their lives" (NA 29). When there is a "violence without," the poetic imagination consists in a counterforce, "a violence from within," which the poet lends to the reader (NA 36, 29). This is not Stevens' sole theory of how the imagination responds to the violent reality of war. At one moment in his essays, the imagination and reality seem mutually exclusive, the strong imagination offering "resistance" and "evasion" as it "cancels the pressure" outside; at the next, they share the happy "interdependence" of a married pair, "equal and inseparable" (NA 23-24). Stevens avows the "escapism" of poetry, its fashioning a second nature as it flees defensively from the first (NA 30); but he also claims that it actively purifies, elevates, abstracts, and converts reality—"Poetry is a purging of the world's poverty and change and evil and death" (NA 23, 50-51; OP 193). Accordingly, his war elegies both respond to war and evade it, both recognize and shirk it, attempting to console by a mode of representation that deliberately straddles escapism and realism. "Poetry is a means of redemption," Stevens claims, and he often seeks to redeem war death by viewing it as an event that dignifies the human (OP 186). His war elegies mourn representative soldiers in anti-theological rites, some of which presuppose an identification of the imaginary combat with the real. Among the primary *consolations* of his war elegies are, as we shall see, the archetypal hero and the mother—figures whose power and totality protect against the extreme pressure of war.

I

In his war poetry Stevens tries to console, and he does so chiefly by viewing death in battle as an occasion that amplifies, elevates, and magnifies the human. In this regard, his war elegies seem old-fashioned, especially set against the work of such contemporaries as Owen and Auden. But before examining Stevens' ceremonies for dignifying the dead soldier, we should recall that some of the war elegies are critical of heroic values. In his doubts, Stevens comes closer to his major contemporaries, since the distinctive war elegies of the twentieth century demystify the supposed glories of combat. Hardy's Drummer Hodge, "Uncoffined," is thrown into a grave to join an alien "plain"; Owen's fighters go to death like "cattle"; Auden's patriots defend Spain through "necessary murder"; Jarrell's airman is hosed out of his craft. Although Yeats usually abstains from such deflations of heroism, even he laments the "cheated dead" in "Reprisals," whose fight was a pointless waste.

Stevens, too, is no blind enthusiast of slaughter. He makes his first claim for public recognition as a poet in "Phases" (1914), an elegiac sequence that both aggrandizes and deflates the warrior.⁴ In two sections, Agamemnon is the point of comparison for the contemporary fighter; he is a hero but a hero disfigured by his ignominious end. The first of these sections reads:

This was the salty taste of glory,
That it was not
Like Agamemnon's story.
Only, an eyeball in the mud,
And Hopkins,
Flat and pale and gory!

(OP 10)

Stevens links the decline in heroism not to technological warfare but to a fall from high to low mimesis, from Homer and Aeschylus to Hopkins. Stabbed to death and cuckolded by Aegisthus, Agamemnon nevertheless retains grandeur, because his narrators never reduce him metonymically to an "eyeball in the mud." But in a companion poem, today's soldier does achieve heroic status, at least in his feelings before death if not in his portrayal:

Death's nobility again
Beautified the simplest men.
Fallen Winkle felt the pride
Of Agamemnon
When he died.

(OP 10)

Bearing a name that lacks the polysyllabic weight and classical gravitas of Agamemnon, Winkle is a diminished thing by comparison with his Greek archetype. But like Yeats's Irish airman, Winkle faces an ennobling fate, preferable to the "waste of breath"⁵ he leaves behind, that homogenizing routine of everyday life. "London's / Work and waste" reduce Winkle to anonymity; at least in death he momentarily participates in a "sacrificial" and "triumphant" existence (OP 11).

The tension between these two responses to the soldier's death recurs in Stevens' work during both world wars. Death dignifies the soldier as long as it has not yet occurred, so that Winkle feels, as he dies, much as Agamemnon did; but after death he will be no more than "an eyeball in the mud," an unsung corpse of the battlefield. Anticipated, death dignifies; past, death degrades. In this sequence as in "Lettres d'un Soldat," Stevens locates the heroism of the "Common Soldier" in his psychic state before death. He interweaves his poems with extracts from the published letters of Eugene Emmanuel Lemercier, a painter killed on the Western Front in 1915. He quotes from them examples of the mind's ability to affirm fate, "*une acceptation assez belle de la fatalité,*" "*une Sagesse qui accepte tout, en s'orientant vers l'action future*" (OP 29, 31). Wrestling with his own death in poems like "Valley Candle" and "Domination of Black," Stevens probably found in the soldier's *amor fati* the resoluteness he aspired to but felt he lacked. As his common soldier states:

No introspective chaos . . . I accept:
 War, too, although I do not understand.
 And that, then, is my final aphorism.
 (OP 29)

For the poet of vertiginous introspection and chaotic equivocation, such final acceptance is an impossible but alluring ideal.

Thirty years and one war later, *Transport to Summer* (1947) includes a number of war poems that still dignify the common soldier on the basis of his anticipatory resoluteness.⁶ These war elegies are, for the most part, less ambivalent toward heroism than the earlier sequences. Recapitulating Winkle's demise, the airman in "Flyer's Fall" is redeemed not by his actions but by his consciousness of death:

This man escaped the dirty fates,
 Knowing that he died nobly, as he died.

 Darkness, nothingness of human after-death,
 Receive and keep him in the deepnesses of space—

Profundum, physical thunder, dimension in which
We believe without belief, beyond belief.
(CP 336)

Like Winkle, the airman escapes the banality of common death. Instead of bidding earth or god to receive the dead man, the elegist apostrophizes the void. Stevens deifies death, granting it the depth, vastness, thunder, and inevitability usually reserved for the gods, the “golden forms” (CP 317) whom he humorously diminishes elsewhere. Death is not a Stevensian “fiction”; that is, it is not a fiction “which you know to be a fiction . . . [but] you believe in it willingly” (OP 189). Rather, death is believed in as a belief beyond all fictions.

Stevens further defines this sacred death by contrasting it with petty death, particularly in an elegy for a pair of war victims, “Burghers of Petty Death.” In alternate stanzas, he juxtaposes the physical fact of the two bodies with the boundless, metaphysical spectacle that they confront as they die:

there is a total death,
A devastation, a death of great height
And depth, covering all surfaces,
Filling the mind.

(CP 362)

Of this mental influx Yeats had written in “Lapis Lazuli,” “Heaven blazing into the head.” By playing on the etymology of *devastation*, Stevens grants death the vastness of the sublime, the infinitude that the mind anticipates. A “wasted” Orpheus, lacking the transformative blue guitar, sadly propounds in his elegiac music the imperious blankness of death’s domain. The bodies, in contrast with this unbounded spectacle, have a definite location in space; they lie on the grass beside a stone wall. Whereas Stevens figures death in the rhetoric of enlargement, he diminishes the “small” bodies, likening them to “two leaves / That keep clinging to a tree.” By sharply distinguishing metaphysical death from the diminution of the corpse, the elegy consoles: it denies death as limit and renders it a “dimension” without dimensions.

In such war elegies death is Stevens’ secular version of the *mysterium tremendum*. Blessed by his proximity to this mystery, Stevens’ representative dying soldier is the opposite of Wilfred Owen’s—a man with “white eyes writhing in his face,” a gas-victim “guttering, choking, drowning” (“Dulce et Decorum Est”). Far from the scene of battle, Stevens meditates neither on the grisly particulars of combat nor on the agonies of dying but on the moment of death itself—the solitary moment that each of us experiences and survives, after all, only in the imagination. His soldier is more poet than combatant, as we know from Stevens’ attempts to conflate the

two at the end of "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" and in his prose statement on war. The notions of enlargement and abstraction are critical components of Stevens' aggrandizing vision of war death. In "Gigantomachia" death's magnitude enlarges the common soldier who awaits it (CP 289). The soldier metonymically borrows from death its vastness and inhumanity: "Each man himself became a giant, / Tipped out with largeness," transcending his individual self to merge with "an inhuman person, / A mask . . ." From Yeats and Nietzsche, Stevens borrows the notion that the warrior fuses with a mask by overcoming human fears. Stevens audaciously returns to the neo-Romantic, even neo-Homeric view that "war magnified" the combatant: he "was increased, enlarged, made simple, / Made single, made one. This was not denial." In this last sentence, set off at the end of a stanza, Stevens defensively reacts to writers like Owen and Auden, for whom war neither dignifies nor essentializes but wastes. If those anti-heroic poets subvert war's glory by supplying details of suffering and inner turmoil, Stevens is true to the subheading of "Notes": "It Must Be Abstract." In a contemporaneous essay Stevens argues that the poet survives a violent world only if he is "able to abstract himself and also to abstract reality, which he does by placing it in his imagination" (NA 23). So in the poem he literally *abstracts* or draws from the real soldier all affective and physical incoherences, arriving at "the being that was an abstraction, / A giant's heart in the veins, all courage." He legitimizes this poetic abstraction by basing it on the soldier's prior abstraction, his expulsion of fears and attachments. The soldier strips himself and his world of "complacent trifles" and "ever-present seductions," until the mundane, chaotic soldier turns simple, courageous, and free. In the context of Stevens' poetics, the soldier becomes the First Idea of the soldier; in the larger context of the elegiac tradition, the soldier resembles such figures as Donne's Elizabeth Drury, who embodies all coherence, or Yeats's Major Robert Gregory, who unites all faculties. To reverse the dispersal wrought by death, the elegy often purges the dead of accidents, representing them as emblems of totality. Stevens' soldier metamorphoses from individual into type, joining a "life that never would end, no matter / Who died . . ." To achieve this consoling vision of the soldier as immortal giant, Stevens pays the price of insensitivity to particular, mortal soldiers. But he justifies this insensitivity by claiming to report the imaginations of resolute soldiers, free in the moment, free not only from anxiety but also from attachment to the past: "They could not carry much, as soldiers. / There was no past in their forgetting . . ."

But not all the poems Stevens wrote during World War II are quite so idealistic. He complicates his notion of the soldier's freedom in a more ambivalent war elegy, the next poem in *Transport to Summer*—"Dutch Graves in Bucks County" (CP 290-92):

Freedom is like a man who kills himself
Each night, an incessant butcher, whose knife
Grows sharp in blood. The armies kill themselves . . .

Stevens represents the liberty of soldiers as self-murder: warriors reside in the ecstatic instant of combat only if they savagely and continually slaughter their previous selves. Although Stevens often merges poet and fighter, he distinguishes them here. Soldiers dwell in an instantaneity unavailable to the poet, who mourns here not only the combatants of the present war but also his dead forefathers. Contemporary fighters and Dutch ancestors are equally locked into their particular historical moments, a temporal specificity that is freedom for the fighters but oblivion for the ancestors. As "crusts that lie / In the shrivellings of your time and place," the Dutchmen "share nothing of ourselves"; they "Know that the past is not part of the present" and "that your children / Are not your children, not your selves." Stevens daringly subverts the ideology of continuity and inheritance that is the traditional bedrock of the war elegy. He accentuates differences between generations of soldiers by juxtaposing apostrophes to the dead Dutchmen with celebrations of the living warriors. The present soldiers are magnified, the ancestors shrunken; the two groups are divided as the "large" against the "tiny," a force that "gathers" against "shrivellings." This poem is Stevens' version of Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard," a lament over the mute and inglorious, the forgotten multitude, "doubly killed / To be buried in desert and deserted earth." Stevens strains to hear the drums tapped "inaudibly" by his ancestors, but the task is difficult in the midst of the present generation's "shouts," its "shuffling" and "marching," its drum-battering and "loudlier" bugle-crying. He overlays this auditory contrast with a visual one. The earlier "rusted armies" are lost in "darkness" and "blindness," while the present marchers swarm in a blue sky and circle the brilliant sun—a military version of the ring of sun-worshippers in "Sunday Morning." The poet bitterly grieves over the unbridgeable gap between the soldier heroically preparing for battle and the soldier moldering in his grave. He tempers this bitterness with the thought that the dead linger within us, like the sounds of a badly tuned radio—"this crackling of voices in the mind." Having portrayed the dead as always defeated, "lost / In an ignorance of sleep with nothing won," he assuages his anger by the poem's end, hoping he has recuperated the healthy "hullabaloo" they once enjoyed. Because of this modest bridge across the generational divide, Stevens can conclude that their lives were not "wasted," nor was their "divergence" in death "too steep to follow down." He has tracked them even into the oblivion of their "sooty residence."

In the war elegies reviewed so far, Stevens represents the global combat chiefly in terms of the soldier's anticipation of death; but in "Esthétique

du Mal" he turns to the dead soldier and tries to invent new rites of mourning for him. Written during the summer of 1944, when the Italian campaign was still underway, the sequence opens near Naples, an area that the Allies had invaded in September of the previous year. Placed at the sequence's center, Stevens' lament for the representative soldier fulfills the principles laid down in earlier sections: to mourn without the help of the gods or of the pathetic fallacy. The iconography repels Vendler because of its "devotional" and "pious" overtones, and Stevens is indeed trying to come up with his own humanistic rituals, appropriating as his centerpiece the traditional rose-wound.⁷ By exploding the god who pities us, the Nietzschean speaker advises, we would no longer "Weaken our fate, relieve us of woe," no longer surrender our humanity to a sympathetic deity; rather, we would learn to bear the weight of our mortality and grief (*CP* 315). The wounded soldier resembles the vegetation gods of the traditional elegy, but in the fifth poem Stevens proposes that we "willingly forfeit the ai-ai" associated with Hyacinthus and thus distinguish this soldier from his mythic predecessors (*CP* 317). Calling forth the mourning procession, he demands that the elegy be completely human:

Softly let all true sympathizers come,
 Without the inventions of sorrow or the sob
 Beyond invention. Within what we permit,
 Within the actual, the warm, the near,
 So great a unity, that it is bliss,
 Ties us to those we love.

(*CP* 317)

Abandoning such mock-elegies as "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" and "Cortège for Rosenbloom," Stevens is now remarkably unembarrassed by pathos. But as in those earlier poems he is still trying to leave behind elegiac conventions. He abjures the external, theological machinery of traditional elegy: "clouds, benevolences, distant heads . . . suns / Of ex-bar . . . golden forms" (*CP* 317). Like the "rotted names" (*CP* 183), they must all be expunged. The earlier sections of the sequence prepare not only for the anti-theological bias of the lament, but also for its revision of the pathetic fallacy, specifically in the image of the rose. Flowers appear in most preceding sections, from the roses that constitute part of the finical persona's defense against pain, to the acacias that the poet frees from their traditional association with mourning and restores to the indifferent night; then the rose the Spaniard sees, unfalsified by human evil or fault; the conventional flower used in religious festivals; and last the "yellow bloom" of sunlike reality, pecked at by the birdlike imagination. Having freed the flower from its pathetic encrustings, Stevens seems to feel that this demythologization justifies the remythologization of it in the first line of the elegy for the

soldier: "How red the rose that is the soldier's wound" (CP 318). Even the summer night breathes a soothing fragrance.

Although the rose may seem a complete departure from his own aesthetic, Stevens uses it and other conventional images with deliberate artifice, emphasizing that this section is a ceremony—a fiction we must read as fiction. He resumes in the first stanza exactly the kind of repetitions he satirized in "Cortège for Rosenbloom," each instance of the words *soldier* and *wound* adding not sense but sound. He expounds his major synecdoche in a similarly self-conscious manner: in successive clauses the one soldier becomes "many," then "all," before collapsing back into a representative "soldier." Stevens even makes literal the elegiac amplification of the dead, granting the soldier "great size" (CP 319). But the poem also qualifies these consolatory fictions. Although the soldier's death is a sleep, he lies in a dark "mountain in which no ease is ever found, / Unless indifference to deeper death / Is ease." This second death recalls the poet's ancestors "doubly killed" in "Dutch Graves," for the soldier dies once when killed and dies a second time when forgotten. Stemming this drift into oblivion, the poet interprets the memorial mound as a mournful troop of shadows:

Concentric circles of shadows, motionless
Of their own part, yet moving on the wind,
Form mystical convolutions in the sleep
Of time's red soldier deathless on his bed.

The shadows of his fellows ring him round
In the high night . . .

(CP 319)

Stevens, "he that of repetition is most master" (CP 406), rewrites the apocalyptic turning in "Domination of Black," the hilarious going round in "The Pleasures of Merely Circulating," the sun-centered revolutions of "Dutch Graves," now making the image represent the mourning mind. In Shelley's *Adonais*, the model here, Keats's weightless dreams, desires, and creations cluster round his body to mourn their loss, while "the wild winds flew round, sobbing in their dismay."⁸ The shadows revolving about the soldier are his fellows' memories of him, perhaps a psychological version of the gathered shades in the pagan underworld. In the context of Stevens' broodings on death's utter solitude, this social setting can be no more than a consoling reverie. Stevens echoes Pascal's famous adage about death's loneliness when he says that "Every man dies his own death" (OP 191); here he tries to conjure a psychic brotherhood, communing after the solitary event of death. Set apart from these shadowy figures, a woman also mourns the death—a Whitmanian image to which we shall return.

II

Two recurrent images in Stevens' war elegies are the hero and the mother. They are both versions of the "supreme fiction"—a fiction that one believes in as a fiction, supreme in its transcendence of conflict and the quotidian. These are fictions that help counter the sense of being "dispossessed and alone in a solitude, like children without parents, in a home that seemed deserted" (*OP* 260). They are, in brief, consoling fictions that stand in for lost gods and lost parents.

Stevens sets forth the idea of the hero in "The Men That Are Falling" and "The Man with the Blue Guitar," poems written during the hostilities preceding the outbreak of World War II. In the works composed during the war, he clarifies the elegiac function of the hero. He announces in the very title of "Asides on the Oboe" that his hymn to the "central man" will be melancholy in sound (*CP* 250-51). As a totality in a time of fragmentation, the fictive hero richly consoles: "the human globe, responsive / As a mirror with a voice, the man of glass, / Who in a million diamonds sums us up." Stevens' hero descends from the Romantic line of such figures, from Coleridge's ideal man who synthesizes all faculties to Emerson's representative man and transparent eyeball to Yeats's Unity of Being. The central man may be "responsive," but as a "globe" he also displaces the war-ravaged world: "we find peace" in him, for he defies reality (here, "'August'") to be anything but what he decrees. He responds to "death and war" by incorporating them within his identity, which reconciles suffering and health, "the central evil, the central good." In "Sunday Morning" Stevens mocks the mythic figures with which we counter loss, but the fictive hero represents the continuing need for a consoling being, a need acutest in a secular era of war. The central man is the ideal war elegist, "chanting for those buried in their blood," recognizing but redeeming loss. Like Stevens, the central man refers to the world of bloodshed chiefly by trying to replace it, offering us a compensatory, inward world that dispenses with "external reference."

Stevens' hero is in part an evasion of war because he represents our desire to transcend violent reality. In "Examination of the Hero in a Time of War," the hero offers a summer's "golden rescue," devised out "of winter's / Iciest core" (*CP* 275). Feeling small and vulnerable in war, we imagine a large being whose "breast is greatness" (*CP* 277). But the hero is not simply a negation of war; he internalizes it, refiguring violence as an inward reality, part of a human totality. In "Man and Bottle," Stevens says of the central mind:

It has to content the reason concerning war,
It has to persuade that war is part of itself,

A manner of thinking, a mode
Of destroying, as the mind destroys . . .
(CP 239)

The heroic but mournful mind consoles itself by means of a harsh logic: it is complicit in the destruction that it laments. To temper outrage and sorrow, it must believe that, when looking upon the outward spectacle of destruction, it gazes upon itself. In his essays Stevens suggests that internalization is the way to cope with the extreme and threatening "pressure" of war: "Resistance to the pressure of ominous and destructive circumstance consists of its conversion, so far as possible, into a different, an explicable, an amenable circumstance" (OP 230). As the price of evading and taming destruction, one must become "a destructive force." Stevens alludes to Blake in his shocking adage, "All men are murderers" (OP 194). Stevens' hero is partly modelled on the Nietzschean *Übermensch*, especially in his affirmation of war and his attempt to make war a part necessary to an aesthetic or psychic whole. Lamenting a wasteland where waves of soldiers and birds inexorably flow, Stevens assumes the role of Nietzschean yea-sayer in the war elegy "Dry Loaf": the "soldiers had to be marching" to their deaths just as the birds during the spring "had to come" (CP 200). Sometimes his defensive yea-saying verges on the sanctification of war. In this he approximates the more frightening accommodations of war not only in Nietzsche but also in the later Yeats. Mourning the representative soldier, for example, Stevens asserts that the "wound is good because life was" (CP 319). He wants to fold war into the imaginative whole of "life." And in "The Auroras of Autumn," he anticipates a catastrophe that would leave us "hanging in the trees next spring"; but having identified the aurora's relentless change with the modulations of his poetry, he thinks of their violent transformations "Almost as part of innocence" (CP 419-20). He states explicitly this identification of war with the imagination in the coda to "Notes," where he first asserts that the mind's war with the sky "depends" on the soldier's war, and then goes even further, claiming that the soldier's war depends on the poet's: "How simply the fictive hero becomes the real; / How gladly with proper words the soldier dies . . ." (CP 408). The poet boasts that the soldier is his creation, since the soldier merely literalizes the fictive hero. Having created the soldier, the poet must also console him; he would do so by convincing the soldier that death is part of a necessary heroic fiction.

The hero is not the only elegiac fiction that Stevens develops in wartime. The mother serves a similar function in the war elegies, although Stevens is more oblique about her than about his public hero.⁹ Like the hero, she is an imaginative construct that enfolds origin and end:

Death is the mother of beauty, mystical,
Within whose burning bosom we devise
Our earthly mothers waiting, sleeplessly.
(CP 69)

Having blown up the traditional gods, Stevens returns to one of their parental prototypes, remythologizing her as both source of beauty and object of desire. This mother, whom he terms one of the “monsters of elegy” in his “mythology of modern death,” allows the poet to hold together in one thought his coming into being and his final demise (“The Owl in the Sarcophagus” [CP 435]). She clearly descends from Death the mother in Whitman’s “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d,” who winds the dead in her enveloping arms. In “Esthétique du Mal,” her mournful presence lends calmness to the scene of the soldier’s death. She resembles the central man in her great size, but whereas the fatherly hero is simply large, she usually is fat: “the most grossly maternal, the creature / Who most fecundly assuaged him, the softest / Woman with a vague moustache . . .” (CP 321). In her bulk she seems to include all opposites, even female and male, much like the “phallic mother” of psychoanalysis. The mythic mother,

Because she is as she was, reality,
The gross, the fecund, proved him against the touch
Of impersonal pain.
(CP 322)

In time of war, she is the ultimate consolation, an imaginary being who shields one against pain, suffering, and death by making them a part of her eternal life:

That he might suffer or that
He might die was the innocence of living, if life
Itself was innocent.
(CP 322)

She resembles the hero in a number of other ways, as we find in “The Auroras of Autumn”: like the man of glass she “gives transparence,” and like the central man she offers “peace.” But as a momentary fiction for assuaging pain, she fades from view:

And yet she too is dissolved, she is destroyed.
She gives transparence. But she has grown old.
The necklace is a carving not a kiss.

The soft hands are a motion not a touch.
The house will crumble and the books will burn.
(CP 413)

As she recedes in memory, the poet laments his estrangement from her body, from her “kiss” and “touch,” now merely an abstract “carving” and “motion.” She still consoles, for the poet now can think of death’s approach as the arrival of “frost,” or just one more occasion for saying to his mother “good-night, good-night.” But released from her protection, he must confront the apocalyptic “rifle-butt” knocking at the door. In the elegy for Henry Church, “The Owl in the Sarcophagus,” the mystical mother again both defends against death and provides access to it. She says “Good-by in the darkness,” and death is the moment after her last farewell—“the silence that follows her last word” (CP 431, 435).

The prototypes of Stevens’ fictive hero and fictive mother are the parents who both occasion one’s earliest fears of loss and also help defend against such feelings. Both figures have a long history in the genre of the elegy—we recall, for example, the protective eye of the divine father in “Lycidas” or Tennyson’s paternal Hallam, Shelley’s mournful Urania, and Swinburne’s large-breasted giantess. But Stevens’ poetic parents differ from these earlier figures in significant ways. His heroes and mothers are more openly paternal imagos, drawn according to the enormous proportions they assume in the child’s psyche. Furthermore, the elegy from “Lycidas” to “Ave Atque Vale” had often encoded in its very structure a recognizable gender pattern that is absent from Stevens: an early dissociation from the female figures—nymphs or mother-muse, giantess or belated Venus—and a subsequent identification with male figures of power and stability—Christ and Apollo.¹⁰ Even so, there are stark differences between the two figures in Stevens: the hero is more conceptual, the mother more physical; the hero is a “sublation” of the father, whereas the mother remains simply the mother; the hero becomes a self-conscious part of Stevens’ aesthetic theory, while the mother lives only in the poems. Despite these differences, they are the primary sources of solace in Stevens’ war elegies. Faced with the extreme violence of war, Stevens finds in his psyche and in poetic tradition these archetypal comforters. Though they offer an escape from war, they also signify it through a kind of inversion, counteracting and internalizing its violence.

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Notes

¹For discussions of Stevens as a war poet, see Northrop Frye, "The Realistic Oriole: A Study of Wallace Stevens," in *Wallace Stevens*, ed. Marie Borroff (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1963), 171; A. Walton Litz, *Introspective Voyager: The Poetic Development of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 22-27, 71-77, 264-66; Charles Berger, *Forms of Farewell: The Late Poetry of Wallace Stevens* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 3-8, 34-80; Milton J. Bates, *Wallace Stevens: A Mythology of Self* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 234-65; James Longenbach, "The 'Fellowship of Men that Perish': Wallace Stevens and the First World War," *The Wallace Stevens Journal* 13, 2 (Fall 1989): 85-108; and Jacqueline Vaught Brogan, "Stevens in History and Not in History: The Poet and the Second World War," *The Wallace Stevens Journal* 13, 2 (Fall 1989): 168-190. Marjorie Perloff argues that Stevens uses lyric poetry to erase the facts of war; see "Revolving in Crystal: The Supreme Fiction and the Impasse of Modernist Lyric," in *Wallace Stevens: The Poetics of Modernism*, ed. Albert Gelpi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 41-64.

²Wallace Stevens, *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination* (New York: Vintage, 1951), 27-28. References to Stevens' works are given parenthetically and by abbreviation in the text: *CP* for *The Collected Poems* (New York: Knopf, 1954); *NA* for *The Necessary Angel*, and *OP* for *Opus Posthumous*, ed. Milton J. Bates (New York: Knopf, 1989).

³*The Poems of Wilfred Owen*, ed. Jon Stallworthy (New York: Norton, 1986), 192.

⁴Litz usefully patches together the existing texts of "Phases" and "Lettres d'un Soldat" (*Introspective Voyager*, 305-15).

⁵W. B. Yeats, "An Irish Airman foresees his Death," *The Poems*, ed. Richard J. Finneran, vol. 1 of *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats* (New York: Macmillan, 1989), 135.

⁶The phrase translates Martin Heidegger's concept of *Entschlossenheit*; see *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 352-64.

⁷Helen Vendler, *On Extended Wings: Wallace Stevens' Longer Poems* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969), 209.

⁸Shelley, *Adonais*, stanzas 9-15; 14.

⁹Stevens writes about his real mother's approaching death in his journal entries of June 25 and July 1, 1912; see *Souvenirs and Prophecies: The Young Wallace Stevens*, ed. Holly Stevens (New York: Knopf, 1977), 253-55. Charles Berger compares these entries with the mother of "The Auroras of Autumn"; see *Forms of Farewell*, 39-40. Joseph Carroll compares them with the mother of "Sunday Morning"; see *Wallace Stevens' Supreme Fiction: A New Romanticism* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987), 52-53.

¹⁰For analysis of the elegy's oedipal structure, see Peter Sacks, *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 8-17.

Revisions of Romanticism in ‘Notes toward a Supreme Fiction’

ELISABETH A. FROST

TRADITIONALLY CRITICS OF STEVENS have agreed on his poetic lineage, placing him in the Romantic tradition; Stevens’ divergences from both Williams’ objective (and what would later become objectivist) poetics and Eliot’s early exploration of the fragmentary make Stevens appear, by contrast, as the exponent of a Romantic “branch” of Modernism. Exploring this lineage, M. H. Abrams argues that “Stevens’ ‘supreme fiction’ . . . incorporates the Romantic freshness of sensation which makes the world new,”¹ while Harold Bloom incorporates Stevens into his theory of “poetic crossing,” asserting that “his work is most certainly in the Romantic traditions—British and American—of the crisis-poem.”²

Yet, as recent critics have demonstrated, the self-consciousness and circularity of Stevens’ art place him, both historically and aesthetically, at a considerable distance from his Romantic forebears.³ The subject of Stevens’ poetry is always poetry itself; from the early “hedonism” of “Sunday Morning” to the pathos of the “interior paramour,” Stevens reflects on his art, peopling his poetry with figures and re-figurings of the poem, the poet, and the muse—the “jar” of poetic form, placed in Tennessee; the artistic pleasures of “merely circulating”; the recasting of experience on the blue guitar. Stevens’ assertion, then, that the poet’s role is “to help people to live their lives”⁴—seemingly corresponding to one traditional definition of Romanticism as “art for man’s sake, and for life’s sake”⁵ (and echoing Wordsworth’s conclusion to the *Prelude* with its prophetic hope to “instruct” the coming generations in the beauty of the human mind)—is belied by the poems themselves, which approach “life” or “reality” only through the colored glass of “fiction” or poetry.⁶ In contrast to the Romantics’ notion of the redemptive imagination (one that often *succeeds* in the quest to unify subject and object, internal and external, and, finally, art and life), Stevens’ depiction of the imaginative process exploits the duality of subjective and objective experience in order to reflect on language itself.

Stevens’ reaction to Romanticism is apparent in “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction,” and, specifically, in that poem’s rewritings of Shelley, a series of narrative commentaries on the Romantic sensibility. Self-consciousness in the very face of the Romantic tradition is the given of “Notes”; as Harold Bloom acknowledges, “Notes” reveals an “excessively acute awareness of its own status as text”; the poem “expound[s] the dilemma of a tradition grown profoundly self-conscious of its vexed rela-

tions to time and to language.”⁷ The “vexed” quality of the poem’s response to Romanticism is evident in the abstractness of Stevens’ poetic fiction, his notes “toward” the poem itself. As Joseph Riddel sees it, “‘Notes’ deflects a poetics of representation into a poetics of repetition, an eccentric repetition that forever precludes the recuperation of an originary or ‘first idea.’”⁸ Thus both the poem’s structure and its slippery “pro-poundings” undo the Romantic rhetoric of faith in a process of unification as well as a tireless striving toward an immediate, unself-conscious art. While—at least in the dominant “humanist” readings of the movement—Romanticism holds out hope for an art of transparency created by a poet successfully mediating between the “breath” of Nature and the subjective minds outside of Nature (imaged in the Aeolian harp, which, through involuntary physical responses, creates a communicative art directly from Nature’s own, primitive voice),⁹ “Notes,” to the contrary, through its very preoccupation with poetry-as-poetry, proffers us neither organic form nor Romantic synthesis, but purely self-examination, a writing of writing.

This self-conscious response to the Romantic idiom is especially apparent in Stevens’ dialogue with Shelley throughout the cantos of “It Must Change.” Stevens recasts Shelley’s “inspirational” poetics into his own reflexive commentary, creating a dialogue with his Romantic forebears in which it is apparent that he cannot return to the unself-conscious art of the greater Romantic lyric. Shelley’s “To a Sky-Lark” and “Ode to the West Wind” appear in “fables” through which Stevens emphasizes the disjunction between a theory positing the “spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling” and his own necessarily reflexive poetics. Through the use of character and narrative in these fables, Stevens objectifies the dominant thematic and formal concern of the Romantic lyric—the fiction of the lyric “I” whose emotions the poem succeeds in graphing, presenting the illusion of spontaneous experience in the act of the poem itself.¹⁰ In two sections in particular of “It Must Change” Shelley makes an ironic appearance—first, in the sixth canto, in a parodic recasting of the “Ode to the West Wind” (with overtones, as well, of the “Sky-Lark”), and, second, in the eighth canto, in a rewriting of the parable of Ozymandias. In both cases, Shelley’s poems are used not to provide a model for the art that can and must change, but as a measure of how far from the ideal of spontaneous (Romantic) utterance Stevens’ own poetic has diverged. The poet of the supreme fiction can glorify neither nature nor Romantic inspiration; the Romantic creed of wedding subjective experience to the natural world is, in Stevens, not fulfilled but necessarily rejected, replaced by a self-conscious art that alone can render its fictions supreme.

Presenting the second dictum of the supreme fiction, “It Must Change” takes on art and artifact as its subject; virtually every canto engages with either a “natural” or a “made” art and places it within either the framework

of fixity or the flexibility of change. Yet, Stevens seemingly reasserts, in the discursive passages of canto IV, the tenets of the Romantic creed; the belief in the reconciliation of subject and object becomes the tentative assertion that

Two things of opposite natures seem to depend
On one another, as a man depends
On a woman, day on night, the imagined

On the real.

(CP 392)

The trope of marriage, the embrace of opposites (“Winter and spring, cold copulars”), seems to promise “the particulars of rapture,” even as the imagination provides the acuity to see into the unity of things. This series of analogies looks forward to Stevens’ linking of opposites in “Imagination as Value”: “the imagination is the power that enables us to perceive the normal in the abnormal, the opposite of chaos in chaos.” Yet just as for Stevens “poetic value is an intrinsic value,” not the value of “faith” or the Romantics’ insistent “ethical values or moral values” (NA 153, 148-49), so “Notes” presents this particular Romantic trope (of uniting opposites) only to “undo” its assumption of unity, demonstrating that even this most dynamic of marriages must be continually dissolved.

The “dissolving” of Romantic unities is reflected in Stevens’ playful assault on the “Ode to the West Wind” in canto VI, a parodic re-enactment of Shelley’s poem, subverting the theories of inspiration and spontaneity so essential to the Romantics’ poetic faith, and demonstrating not a romantic unity with nature but the disjunction between self and other, poet and world, and hence the impossibility of writing a lyric of “unpremeditated art.” Shelley’s ode enacts the poet’s quest for the sublime, and, despite the speaker’s despair over his “sore need,” the poem is self-fulfilling, making an impassioned artistic statement out of the very dearth of creative force it takes as its subject. “[T]he incantation of this verse”—the appeal to the west wind to inspire the poet—succeeds because the poet is able to internalize the “model” the wind provides, that of powerful utterance, the translation of pure force into a language of feeling. Thus the speaker who longs to “share / The impulse of thy strength,” to be lifted above “the thorns of life” into a transcendent “new birth,” takes on the simplicity and power of nature’s un-languaged speech. The poem achieves by its own incantatory force the regeneration the poet seeks: to be made the lyre of a greater, unconscious force, as the “forest” is the wind’s lyre.¹¹

Stevens takes Shelley’s seemingly spontaneous utterance—a movement from despair to joy, occurring in a simple lyric present—and complicates it into self-consciousness. As Jerrold Hogle notes, Shelley’s poem is one of radical transformations, troping that moves so quickly that the poem itself

can barely contain its own mythic re-formations, “translated again and again”: “The west wind has no sooner become the angelic, Protean, Triton-like, and Mars-like blower of the ‘clarion’ or war-trumpet . . . than it is turned into the Hindu oscillation between Siva and Vishnu.”¹² It might seem appropriate for Stevens to borrow Shelley’s most “changing” of utterances, at the same time re-investing it with a typically eccentric mythology of his own. Yet, this canto of “It Must Change” redefines the Romantic delight in a Hegelian “becoming,” answering both “Ode to the West Wind” and “To a Sky-Lark” with the argument that nature can be no model for art, for nature itself succumbs to its own “idiot minstrelsy,” speech without thought, utterance without meaning.

From the very opening of canto VI, Shelley’s assumption of a direct relationship to nature—the faith in the transcendental that makes the apostrophe itself possible—is questioned through the “re-writing” of Shelley’s command: “Be thou, Spirit fierce / My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one!” The imperative that serves as Shelley’s climactic appeal becomes Stevens’ wry opening, stripped of drama and pathos. Stevens’ iambs might seem to answer directly to their source: “Bethou me, said sparrow, to the crackled blade, / And you, and you, bethou me as you blow, / When in my coppice you behold me be” (CP 393). Yet, both the change of emphasis in the metrics (be thou *me*, becoming be *thou* me) and the linguistic ambiguity (the pun on “tutoie-moi” and the elision of the two separate words) alter the original imperative into a complex and self-conscious event of language, punning and bilingual. In the nonce word “bethou” the poet at once asserts and undermines the Shelleyan command to fuse the two identities of subject and object: the pathos of Shelley’s original appeal is transformed into an imperious command reminiscent of that of the authoritarian “President” who “ordains the bee to be / Immortal” (CP 390), as though change itself could be fixed. Thus “bethou” becomes a mockery of the equation of self and other, even as the pun on *tutoyer* reminds us that nature itself is not unified but, as Stevens would have it, participates in its own caste system, one that could lead a sparrow condescendingly to urge the familiar mode of address on a “crackled blade.” Thus, the stanza conflates being and speech, self and social rank, rather than decrying such distinctions. It is on this linguistic level that Stevens does the most damage to Shelley’s plea to the west wind; instead of a despairing poet proffering his cries to the pantheistic god of the wind, Stevens chooses the common sparrow (a “catbird,” as he identifies it [L 435]) addressing a “crackled blade,” an apparently depleted, even lifeless, latter-day version of Whitman’s leaves of grass. Not only, then, is nature itself disunified (its various members addressing each other through language, and a language aware of both itself and the anthropomorphic caste distinctions it has apparently adopted), but its sublimity perhaps never

did exist at all, its "West Wind" ("thou breath of Autumn's being," and "Destroyer and Preserver") no more than a sparrow's imperious chirpings.

Stevens offers a deceptively naturalistic explanation of this passage in the letter in which he identifies the sparrow as a "catbird" and wrens in general as "fighters," calling the whole poem "rather an old-fashioned poem of the onomatopoeia of a summer afternoon" (L 435). Yet, as Helen Vendler points out, Stevens presents two opposing views of the sparrow's utterance.¹³ On the one hand,

The change is an ingratiating one and intended to be so. When the sparrow begins calling be-thou: *Bethou* me . . . he expresses one's own liking for the change; he invites attention from the summer grass; he mocks the wren, the jay, the robin. . . . *Bethou* is intended to be heard; it and *ké-ké*, which is inimical, are opposing sounds. *Bethou* is the spirit's own seduction. (L 438)

And yet, the *tutoyant* itself, too—the sparrow's command—becomes anti-theoretical to change: "All this insistent *tutoyant* becomes monotonous and merges into a single sound. So faces tend to become one face as if they had met a glass blower's destiny" (L 435). Vendler interprets this opposition as Stevens' "anger at the inevitable exhaustion of religious myth," exploring the various ecclesiastical images that appear in the canto.¹⁴ Yet, given Stevens' choice of Shelleyan diction cast into a disappointing naturalistic universe, it seems clear that his response is also to the Romantic sensibility that gave birth to the myth of "natural supernaturalism," as M. H. Abrams has described it—the reappropriation of Christian myth into a new religion of nature, according to which the west wind could be transmogrified into a source of salvation. The poem, in fact, goes on to mock the sparrow's efforts as those of the Romantic sensibility. An immediate distinction follows in the second stanza: "Ah, *ké!* the bloody wren, the felon jay, / *Ké-ké*, the jug-throated robin pouring out" (CP 394). Appropriately, these rival sounds will soon become "A single text, granite monotony." Yet, the sparrow's "bethou," by sheer repetition ("Bethou, bethou, bethou me in my glade"), also merges with the sounds around it, the singer himself ultimately turning, too, to "stone." Indeed, if we look ahead to the end of the poem, the sparrow's unchanging refrain will become just another element of a mortal world, the poet himself, with his greater awareness, asserting that "It will end." Here, then, encapsulated in the plot of the poem, lies not the story of "natural supernaturalism," but of natural monotony—surpassed by the poet's own fictions.

Thus the sparrow's seemingly eloquent response to nature ("bethou" as surpassing "ké-ké") reflects the failure of subjective utterance reacting to the objective world. But the natural world, too, like the sparrow's song, is depicted ironically. The earliest indication of the depletion of nature

itself, after the self-conscious “bethou” first appears, is in the transcriptions of the other birds’ “songs.” By point of contrast, in Shelley’s “To a Sky-Lark,” the speaker presents a metaphoric rendering of nature’s un-languaged speech, meditating on one natural phenomenon in terms of another: “All the earth and air / With thy voice is loud, / As when night is bare / From one lonely cloud / The moon rains out her beams and Heaven is overflowed.”¹⁵ Whether or not Stevens is reacting specifically to Shelley’s language and imagery here, the comparison is enlightening: instead of an ecstatic vision of heaven and earth, in which the bird’s call is represented metaphorically through natural imagery, Stevens playfully transcribes pure sound (signifier without either signified or referent) into a meaningless phonology of our own—“ké-ké.” Similarly, instead of Shelley’s image in “Ode to the West Wind” of the wind as a “fierce” and “impetuous” spirit, both more forceful and more spontaneous than the poet (who is falling helplessly on “the thorns of life”), or of the sky-lark as teacher to the ineffectual poet, Stevens paints nature in brutal terms (“the bloody wren,” “the felon jay,” “jug-throated robin”), associating with it not the “uncontrollable” force that can “quicken a new birth,” but mere violence and a “language” of nonsense. So Stevens reverses the processes of mimesis and inspiration implicit in Shelley’s art: while the rhetoric of “Notes” may assert that “Clouds are pedagogues” (CP 384), the revision of nature’s force and the re-languaging, and subsequent de-languaging, of its voices lead us to believe not in its pantheistic power, capable of renewing the poet’s own strength, but in its paucity, its mere repetitions; like the sparrow, nature itself fails to reach Romantic heights.

Thus the “idiot minstrelsy” that follows in the third stanza, pointing to the monotony of rain (“There was such idiot minstrelsy in rain, / So many clappers going without bells”), underscores nature’s own voice as “antithetical” (as Stevens might say) to art itself. Unlike either the west wind or Shelley’s sky-lark, these natural voices are “idiot,” without meaning, and thus inimical to the imagination. In both Shelley’s poems, the poet seeks spontaneity, the “unpremeditated” song of nature that can provide a model for genuine poetic utterance. Stevens turns the Romantic notion of “unpremeditated art” into the “idiot minstrelsy” of a mechanical nature: “There was such idiot minstrelsy in rain, / So many clappers going without bells, / That these bethous compose a heavenly gong.” This is the opposite of the redemptive natural utterance Shelley presents as a model for the subjective imagination, one that would involve nature’s own reflexivity, as the bird’s song would be mimetic of the wind, and, in turn, of human speech. The futile motion behind the “idiot minstrelsy”—clappers without bells—suggests, to the contrary, both the artificial quality of nature itself and an art manqué, for clearly no meaningful sound can ever be produced. Thus to the

sparrow, as figure for the poet, nature is not model but simply opponent—and not even a sublimely powerful one at that.

At this juncture in the poem, then, the original opposition between mere monotony and the seemingly meaningful utterance of the sparrow becomes the voice of the subjective sensibility in failed response to a flawed natural world. Stevens is thus calling into question the Wordsworthian and Shelleyan ideal of “instruction” from the spirits of nature. A turn now takes place, however—the transformation of the sparrow’s “bethous” from “the spirit’s own seduction” into yet another exemplum of “A sound like any other.” In the third stanza, focusing on the “idiot minstrelsy,” Stevens’ comment on the poem that “In the face of death life asserts itself” (L 438) seems apt, for the sound of the “bethous,” as opposed to the brutal repetition of “ké-ké,” is indeed “heavenly.” Our first intimation of the poet’s discomfort with “bethou” is apparent, however, in the image of the gong, recalling Yeats’s “clamorous gong” in “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen”: an insistent, mechanical force becomes the ironic complement to the idiot minstrelsy’s clappers that lack their own bells, as though even consummation (clapper meeting bell, a realized artistic act) results only in monotone, a “gong.” In the dialectic between opposition (the “ké-ké” as “inimical” to “bethou”) and complicity (all becoming one “granite monotony”), the “gong” very quickly becomes conflated with “one tireless chorister” repeating his “single phrase.” Thus, the stanza break (beginning, “One voice repeating”) creates a deliberate ambiguity between these “opposing” sounds, for the “voice” of the “tireless chorister” (“One voice repeating”) could just as easily refer to the “gong” (“these bethous compose a heavenly gong”). The next three stanzas go on to develop this implicit conflation between “bethou” and “ké-ké” in a series of appositions. In contrast to the three preceding stanzas, all self-contained syntactically, composed each of a single sentence divided into end-stopped lines, the final four heighten the sense of the purposeless and mindless motion of nature’s chorus and, finally, assert a higher, essentially “unnatural” art—the poet’s art—as the source for the redemptive change.

The fourth and fifth stanzas move away from the Shelleyan echo raised by “bethou,” away from difference and meaning asserting themselves against monotony:

One voice repeating, one tireless chorister,
The phrases of a single phrase, ké-ké,
A single text, granite monotony,

One sole face, like a photograph of fate,
Glass-blower’s destiny, bloodless episcopos,
Eye without lid, mind without any dream . . .

The stakes are successively raised against the “tireless chorister”: clearly nature itself is unable to provide what the poet seeks—“the origin of change” (canto IV), a language for the poet’s art. Thus the “text” of nature ends as a “granite monotony,” a dull stone, providing neither change nor exchange, but, instead, “[t]he phrases of a single phrase,” as though all phrases (musical or verbal) were composed of *other* phrases, as though there were no originary gesture. There is thus no source outside ourselves for the “passion that we feel, not understand” (canto IV); the “phrases” merely circle in on themselves, without either center or *telos*. Yet, this judgment is only the first in the sequence of condemnatory appositions that follows, a parodic version of Shelley’s accelerating tropes in “Ode to the West Wind,” raised in pitch virtually line by line. Thus, the relatively abstract “granite monotony” becomes specified in the fifth stanza, into “One sole face,” leading to a parody of faith in a personalized god, each figure more “damning” than the next: “sole face, like a photograph of fate,” “Glass-blower’s destiny,” “bloodless episcopus.” Just as the glass-blower’s “destiny” of melting all into fluid subtly underscores the conflation of the poet’s “bethou” with nature’s “ké-ké,” so, too, this figure for God (a prevision of the “lasting visage in a lasting bush” of canto III of “It Must Give Pleasure”) is drained of blood, of life, even as nature itself has no better representative than the catbird and crackled blade.

The climax of this series returns to the “art” of the bird’s song in a depiction of nature as completely devoid of imagination—the power that transforms mere sound, mere repetition, into meaning: “Eye without lid, mind without any dream.” What nature lacks is exactly what Shelley sought in it—the pure feeling that is our best teacher, the “unpremeditated art” that alone can serve as the poet’s model. As a song, “ké-ké” (and the sparrow’s supposedly antithetical “bethou” as well) lacks “minstrelsy,” because it lacks the transformative cover of fiction; it is “naked,” without lid or dream. And dream—imagination—is the only genuine source of movement, without which even the sparrow becomes “a bird / Of stone, that never changes.” Unlike the Wordsworthian imagination, then, coloring what it perceives with its own subjective (and redemptive) glow, thus infusing the pure beauty of nature with what the consciousness alone can experience and articulate, the Stevensian imagination seems to be more radically opposed to the “not-me,” as the murmurings of nature become more and more alien not only to human consciousness but to the “changingness” of life itself; nature becomes an “Eye without lid,” as though the transparent eyeball itself were fixed in ineffectual stasis. In this hopelessly tired universe, “the first leaf is the tale / Of leaves,” for (unlike the world of Whitman’s “leaves”) there is no origin to return to, only an infinite regress through nature’s lifeless, yet endlessly iterating, forms.

Most significant, however, is the contrast between Shelley's tireless troping in "Ode to the West Wind" and "To a Sky-Lark" and Stevens' transformations in these three stanzas. For Shelley, the sky-lark (or, for that matter, the wind in the "Ode") is the "referent" for the metaphors that so quicken the life of the poem; the speaker conjures images in the effort to capture, however feebly, the grandeur of the bird's song. Thus the sky-lark is, in quick succession, "blithe spirit," "cloud of fire," "star of heaven," "poet," "maiden," "glow-worm," "rose." The poet seeks to make word and image one, striving to shape language into a transparent medium through which images are conveyed, our means of getting as close as we can to the thing (a noumenal presence) perceived. Stevens denies this series of steps, short-circuiting the processes of language, for the referent for all the transformative figures is not a noumenal thing at all, but language itself, and language turned in *on* itself: it is "The phrases of a single phrase" that initiate the series of metaphors, from "text" to "face" to "Eye without lid, mind without any dream." Thus the very source of tropes is a short-circuited language, even as Stevens' own use of Shelleyan imagery points to his revision of Romantic "transparency."

And yet the poem provides its own escape. The sparrow as "bird / Of stone" is literally fixed by the poet's interpretive vision, and this vision is itself the source for "the origin of change." Just as in the close of the General Du Puy poem of canto III ("Yet the General was rubbish in the end" [CP 392]), the poet himself gets the final word, inserting his own voice into the narrative to mark its limitations:

the sparrow is a bird

Of stone, that never changes. Bethou him, you
And you, bethou him and bethou. It is
A sound like any other. It will end.

In a final dismissal of nature as a Romantic model for artistic utterance, Stevens undoes the negative vision of monotony created throughout the poem by asserting that monotony itself must end, and that the poet alone, as crafter, can effect the change.¹⁶ Now the poet, not the sparrow, is giving the commands ("Bethou him, you / And you"), commands that ring ironically, finally stripped even of an object ("bethou him and bethou"). Only the poet's own resources—his power to see beyond the "idiot" minstrelsy of nature—can proffer him the hope of change; thus, in a final, masterful pun, the poem closes with its own "end," an indirect assertion of the poet's powers of shaping, of creating from the chaos of nature's "unself-conscious" art a conscious—even reflexive—art, daring to identify its own beginning and its end. Like so many of Stevens' dicta, however, this final declaration is cast in the future: "It is / A sound like any other. It will end." Like the supreme fiction itself, the "end" of monotony is a

function of imagination, and so its realization is cast not as part of the narrative but as an event of a yet different state, one reflected not in the "coppice" of nature's first garden—an originary state we can in fact never recapture—but in the eternal future of the poet's conceptions. As Stevens wrote in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," the poet "gives to life the supreme fictions without which we are unable to conceive of it" (NA 31). Not the Romantic's "unpremeditated" but the Modernist's "imagined" and sculpted world finally emerges as the source of change, and, hence, of the poem itself.

In canto VIII, the second, and more explicitly "borrowed" recasting of a Shelley lyric, we find a surprisingly similar structure—a parable or brief narrative that ironically reverses the intention of its original source. Like the "Bethou" section, and like the parables of the President and General Du Puy, the Ozymandias narrative is a tale about the human desire to fix, to resist change and seek the "diamond coronal" rather than the flux of being. Yet, here again art itself—the made, the willed product of imagination—gets the final word. As in the other parables, "imagination as value" is not demonstrated in the poem itself; the "fiction" depicted is, instead, a negative model, like that of the statue of the General, or the sparrow's "bethou." And yet this "warning" differs fundamentally from Shelley's. Shelley's parable addresses the arrogance of mortal power and aspiration (exemplified in the king and his double, the statue), and, at the same time, reveals the artist's own fear that art will give way to the force of mutability nature exerts. Stevens' parable, to the contrary, is about the "fictive covering"—the poet's art; Ozymandias is transformed from a Shelleyan object lesson about the vanity of human dominion in contrast to nature's sublimity into the oracle of the Stevensian creed, of neither naturalism nor the subjective sublime, but of the poet's own craft—the weaving that casts over nature's "nakedness" the "fictive covering" of imagination.

Like canto VI, this canto makes us subtly aware of its place within "Notes," by pointing both behind and ahead in the sequence, calling attention to its status in the larger work. Thus Ozymandias is himself prefigured in General Du Puy, another emblem of the mighty fallen (into "rubbish in the end"); the motif of the "mystic marriage" will be taken up again in the parable of the Captain and Bawda, and in the poet's own relation to his "interior paramour," the fat girl; and the creator's act of self-creation ("As I am, I am") anticipates the Canon's climactic declaration, "I have not but I am and as I am, I am." All these reflections backward and forward emphasize that the project of "Notes" is "toward" something other—the "central poem," the ultimate fictive covering as against the illusion of a Romantic unpremeditated art; even as the strict stanzaic form of "Notes" undercuts Coleridgean organic form, so this recourse to reflexivity in Stevens' rewriting of Shelley eliminates the possibility of a purely

emotive and spontaneous poetics, one of "a man speaking to men." For Stevens, the anxiety with which Shelley infuses "Ozymandias"—the fear of both art's mockery of the maker's own hand, and of art's transience—becomes the fuel for an aesthetics to answer that of the Romantics.

In explanation of the "theory" of "Notes" and as preface to a discussion of canto VIII, Stevens summons the vocabulary of both Coleridge and William James ("There are things with respect to which we willingly suspend disbelief," and "if there is instinctive in us a will to believe" [L 430]) in a return to the preoccupation of "The Noble Rider and the Sounds of Words," that of "escapism," or, in a less pejorative coinage, "illusion":

if we are willing to believe in fiction as an extension of reality, or even as a thing itself in which we must believe, the next consideration is the question of illusion as value. Under the name of escapism this is one of the problems that bothers people. The poem about Ozymandias is an illustration of illusion as value. (L 431)

Clearly this description of the poem's purpose places the artist in the "supreme" position. While Shelley's poem reflects the artist's fear of mutability and situates the sculptor in the position of unwilling servant to the king (a "hand" that "mock[s]" the passions it reproduces), for Stevens the "hand and heart" of Ozymandias become the instruments of art's triumph. We can compare, for instance, the dictum of Ozymandias in "Notes" ("A fictive covering / Weaves always glistening from the heart and mind" [CP 396]) with the ironic speech of Shelley's King—"Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!"—witnessed only by the solitary traveler and the "lone and level sands." Stevens argues in "The Noble Rider" that the poet's role is "to help people to live their lives" (NA 29); the parable of Nanzia Nunzio illustrates just this maxim in its ironic and playful borrowing of Shelley's character, for here "art"—revivified in the living, speaking Ozymandias—actually *corrects* life, in the person of the dogmatic Nanzia Nunzio.

Like the "Bethou me" canto, then, there is a deliberate disjunction between the narrative and its frame—the plot of the fable and the meta-narrative voice that exists outside the tale. This poem, however, is more symmetrically structured, beginning not with Nanzia Nunzio's own voice (as canto VI begins directly with the sparrow's song), but with a setting of the scene, accomplished for us by the narrator, who informs us that "On her trip around the world, Nanzia Nunzio / Confronted Ozymandias." This neutral voice observes that she came "Alone and like a vestal long-prepared," reminding us again of the religious quest that has become a motif in "Notes." But whereas in canto VI this quest is parodied through

a deflation of Romantic “natural supernaturalism,” here the narrative will deconstruct the marriage trope, the worship of a “vestal” that, blasphemously, becomes that of the “spouse.” We move, accordingly, in the second stanza, from the frame to the narrative itself, from the simile of the narrator (“like a vestal”) to the assertion of our central character: “I am the spouse.”

What follows is a chiasmatic series of stanzas consisting of Nanzia Nunzio’s bald statements to Ozymandias which become the center, but not the heart, of the poem; for the final stanza reverses the group of assertions Nanzia Nunzio has just posited, and reasserts the significance of the frame, confining all she says to the interior of the poem and implying a superiority of vision shared by the narrator and Ozymandias himself, as the “character” who is, literally, allowed the last word in the exchange. Thus, the most significant action—the true “moral” of the story—occurs not in the center but along the margins of the tale.

If the structural element governing the poem is the marriage trope, along with its rhetorical counterpart of chiasma, then a similar “pairing” occurs as well in the creator’s “divine” act of naming his characters. The narrator’s sense of play is apparent in his heroine’s name, “Nanzia Nunzio.” Like the Captain and Bawda (married in Catawba), this “marriage” couple shares an insistent phonology: z’s and n’s recur in the proper names “Nanzia Nunzio” and “Ozymandias” (as does the long vowel “i”), as though in parody of this marriage as an ideal union. In addition, “Nunzio” puns both on the idea of a papal envoy and on the notion of annunciation (*Nunziata*, or *annunzio*, *announcement*), and “Nanzia” possibly derives from *innanzi*, meaning *before*, or (when prefacing a *Dio*) *in the sight of God*.¹⁷ Thus the “vestal’s” annunciation consists of her stripping to nakedness before what she believes is an “inflexible / Order,” a God from whom she hopes to receive a series of “messages,” but to whom she herself has plenty to say; the “annunciation” is as much Nanzia’s as it is Ozymandias’. Stevens thus accomplishes two separate purposes in naming his heroine “Nanzia Nunzio.” Most simply, the very name mocks the nature of the annunciation to stem from this not so “mystic” marriage—for the “birth” we, and she, will learn of is *not* a human birth, but a “fictive covering,” not a savior but a redemptive “making,” a weaving. Further, though, the God who issues the final word is himself no “inflexible / Order” but the god of change, and of change in art itself; thus, he is the god of neither the absolute nor the natural, but Shelley’s *statue* of Ozymandias, a figure for his own poem—not the man but art itself fully redeemed.

In the following five stanzas—the “body” of the poem—we watch and hear Nanzia Nunzio perform her striptease and utter her telling maxims in futile search for the absolute “Order.” The movement, however, is chiasmatic rather than linear; although the act of “divest[ing]” herself of,

first, “ornament” and, finally, all that “Clothe[s]” her, seems to provide a narrative progression, the nature of her utterance merely shifts between two poles. In a first section, a repetitive structure develops from the permutations of “I am the spouse” (particularly in stanzas two through four). In the second section a shift occurs as Nanzia Nunzio switches to a series of imperatives (“Speak to me,” “Set on me,” “Clothe me”), mandating from the God she worships an “annunciation” for herself alone. This center of the poem, then, turns in on itself even as it reverses the structure of Shelley’s sonnet, which, using its own narrative frame, focuses mainly on the description of the statue, to prepare for the irony of Ozymandias’ pompous inscription. Bloom reads Ozymandias’ response to Nanzia Nunzio’s insistent appeals as a “Shelleyan reply . . . properly High Romantic.”¹⁸ For Nanzia Nunzio, however, both her own spontaneous utterances and her actions lead only in circles, the result of a misguided “life” that indeed calls out for the corrective of “art.” Instead of the Wordsworthian necessity of judging the work by the life lived (like the poet of Book XIV of the *Prelude*), Stevens allows art to chide life itself, and thus “corrects” Wordsworthian or Shelleyan Romanticism.

In the first two of Nanzia Nunzio’s five stanzas, the issue of identity, the state of “being” that haunts “It Must Change” and “Notes” as a whole is conflated with the chiasmatic nature of her utterances, even as the “bethou” becomes indistinguishable from the nonsensical sounds it strives to outdo:

I am the spouse. She took her necklace off
And laid it in the sand. As I am, I am
The spouse. She opened her stone-studded belt.

I am the spouse, divested of bright gold,
The spouse beyond emerald or amethyst,
Beyond the burning body that I bear.

(CP 395)

Thus her statement of self-definition (“I am the spouse,” repeated twice in stanza two and again in stanzas three and four) becomes circular, twisting itself over line breaks (“I am the spouse. She took her necklace off / And laid it in the sand. As I am, I am / The spouse”), appearing in different positions within the stanza, and quickly becoming interwoven with the process of being “stripped more nakedly / Than nakedness.” Just as “As I am, I am” inverts the sparrow’s “bethou him and bethou,” so her repeated assertions echo the “idiot minstrelsy” of the sparrow’s utterance. These repeated assertions, then, actually fulfill the same function as Ozymandias’ single statement in Shelley’s poem—that of protesting too much, providing an ironic surface in contrast to which the poet-speaker can pursue his own plan: “plainly to propound” (CP 389) a clearer truth.

In Shelley's poem, however, anxiety about the worth and fate of artistic creation fires the irony itself; the "traveller" Shelley names as the witness of the statue's ruin ("I met a traveller from an antique land") serves solely a narrative function, while Ozymandias becomes the target of the cosmic joke, the irony that "Nothing beside remains," reflecting the poet's fear (despite his own act of creation) that artistic ambition is as fruitless as the pursuit of earthly power. Stevens uses Nanzia Nunzio's circular thinking to the opposite end: the "vestal" is herself *unprepared* for the "confrontation" with the vital statue, the oracle that possesses superior vision and in fact represents art's effective mediation between the living and the spoken. Thus Nanzia Nunzio's very hopes, as articulated in the canto's fifth stanza—to be baptized by words ("Speak to me that, which spoken, will array me / In its own only precious ornament") and to reach a hard, "naked" truth, an absolute ("the spirit's diamond coronal," "the final filament")—reflect her lack of understanding of the marriage she anticipates. She hopes to strip herself of ornament: first "her necklace," then "her stone-studded belt," and, in increasingly metaphoric terms, "bright gold . . . emerald or amethyst." Soon "stripped more nakedly / Than nakedness," she believes herself more "real," prepared to receive a single and unchanging truth. What she yearns for is, in fact, a "covering," "that, which [when] spoken, will array [her] / In its own only precious ornament." And yet the "final filament" she seeks allows for neither the flexibility of change nor the imaginativeness of fiction: she wants "the spirit's diamond coronal," a tribute to the adamantine Absolute, not a Jamesian will to believe in a supreme fiction of our choosing. Thus she is misguided both in investing Ozymandias with the qualities of an "inflexible / Order," making him a *religious* rather than a *fictional* entity, and in perceiving him as a god of an impossible, universal permanence.

Stevens makes clear her heritage: her mistake, in fact, is tied to the seductive project of human perfectability ("I tremble with such love so known / And myself am precious for your perfecting"), a goal shared by Enlightenment and Romantic thinkers alike. The error Nanzia Nunzio commits in hoping for a single utterance, an unambiguous annunciation from Ozymandias, is in seeing the object of her pilgrimage as a god, a personalized deity, rather than perceiving this figuring of Ozymandias as himself an example of "A fictive covering," that is, of art itself. Revising, then, the Romantic tendency to transform the inheritance of Christian worship into a secular religion of nature, Stevens asserts instead the primacy of art, through the imagination, as the working, shifting "truth" we need to embrace.

It is in this new "truth" that the most overt revision of Shelley's "Ozymandias" occurs. Shelley's "Ozymandias" leaves us with a vision of the sublime—if seemingly indifferent—face of nature: "boundless and

bare / The lone and level sands stretched far away"; the implicit anxiety about the futility of artistic production finds expression in an acknowledgment of nature's supremacy in the scheme of every human enterprise, even if that sense of nature's dominion dwarfs rather than ennobles human effort. For Stevens, however, the Romantic vision can no longer sustain us; Nanzia Nunzio seeking a kind of secular god must inevitably be disappointed, receiving for her efforts merely a contradiction of all her assumptions about the "Order" she seeks. Ozymandias' utterance in Shelley's poem appears in the second remove of an artistic inscription ("My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings, / Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!"), ironically witness not only to the human frailty apparent in Ozymandias' own demise, but also the artistic failure represented by the ruin of the statue itself. Stevens, however, rejects mere inscription (of the sort that might appear on the pedestal of General Du Puy's "absurd" likeness) in favor of the living, spoken word, uttered, however, not by the "real" but by the "statue." Thus art as art, not as a mere representation of either nature or divinity, is the revivifying force in the universe of the poem, a corrective to the flamboyant gesticulations of Nanzia Nunzio.

Thus, Ozymandias is a figure for art, for the product of the imagination, and as such he reclaims for poetry the poem itself: the marriage is between the "central poem" and the world it creates. The words Ozymandias chooses to speak echo the Stevensian creed of the fictive, the need for not an absolute as value, nor a Romantic egotistical sublime, but a "covering," a mediation:

Then Ozymandias said the spouse, the bride
Is never naked. A fictive covering
Weaves always glistening from the heart and mind.
(CP 396)

There is no "final filament," nor is there "'the decay / Of [a] colossal Wreck.'" There is simply the merging of process and product, the art of "weaving" the continually changing "covering" of the fictive, as though Penelope's loom and its creation of a changing and necessary fiction were now the prototype for artistic creation. Only through this fictive covering, then, can "heart and mind," sentiment and reason, or even imagination and reality, ever hope to be unified—and yet mediation is also an end in itself, a "glistening" that produces its own beauty and even its own "bride." Nanzia Nunzio, set in her place, appears no further; the last word is indeed granted to the "oracle" she sought, despite its unexpected pronouncement. Thus the differences between Shelley's fable and Stevens' reveal Stevens' own divergence from the Romantic conception of art as handmaiden to a divine nature. For Stevens, to the contrary, art or fiction makes life as we experience it possible, even as "A poet's words are of

things that do not exist without the words" (NA 32). And Shelley, too—both his anxiety and his faith—can now be set aside, for the Romantic argument for a transparent and humanistic art is answered.

There is, however, one last appearance of Shelley in "It Must Change," appropriately at the close of the sequence:

A bench was his catalepsy, Theatre
Of Trope. He sat in the park. The water of
The lake was full of artificial things . . .
.....
The west wind was the music, the motion, the force
To which the swans curveted, a will to change,
A will to make iris frettings on the blank.
(CP 397)

Whether or not Stevens, in canto X, deliberately echoes Shelley in choosing the "west wind" to play the role of stage manager in his "Theatre / Of Trope," the appearance of this "breeze," the single most frequent figure in the Romantic canon for the process of "inspiration," can be no coincidence. Again, however, the common Romantic trope is included only to be revised, for in this section as well, not the breeze itself but the theater of trope—not the spontaneity of Romantic utterance but the weavings and unweavings of art—becomes the focal point of the creative process. While Shelley longs merely to approach the ferocious power of the west wind in his own poetic utterances, Stevens, with no such anxiety of falling into mundanity, into the "premeditated" and hence the stale or lifeless, concerns himself only with the figures in the theater, the playing out of the props on the stage, the pleasure of metaphorizing the "artificial." The "west wind" has become "the music, the motion, the force" from which the elements of the theater of trope glean their "will to change"; the wind is itself thus transmogrified from a transcendent "spirit" into the mover of "artificial things," "changing essences." Metaphors of metaphors, and naturalistic representations of art-as-metaphor ("Like a page of music," "Like a momentary color") have overtaken the poem; as Riddel points out, "'Notes' reinscribes the fiction of the 'immaculate beginning' . . . into a 'Theatre / Of Trope,' revealing that in the play of 'artificial things' the notion of an original thing itself from which all images derive is itself a trope."¹⁹ Stevens thus inscribes into the poem the impossibility of gleaning from nature the power of either transcendental or organic art, but it is nonetheless still possible to attain "The freshness of transformation," that is, in essence, "The freshness of a world." Indeed, the "subject," the lyric self, is replaced by the poet and his own "beginnings," the maker who creates the "rubbings" ("that necessity and that presentation / Are rubbings of a glass in which we peer") that are the "amours" time will record.

No longer seeking spontaneity as a good in itself, and no longer fearing the drying up of the “breeze” of creative inspiration, the narrative voice has no difficulty uttering with perfect certitude that the process of making art will itself fulfill its own and all of our demands: “Of these beginnings, gay and green, propose / The suitable amours. Time will write them down.” In this final revision of Romantic poetics, Stevens succeeds again in anticipating the attainment of his idea: “Notes toward” are themselves supreme, for in the “rubblings of a glass in which we peer,” fiction is its own end, and the General—so long as he is changing in the face of his own reflection—need not be rubbish in the end.

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Notes

¹M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1971), 423.

²Harold Bloom, *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 2. For other explorations of Stevens and Romanticism, see Joseph Carroll's *Wallace Stevens' Supreme Fiction: A New Romanticism* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1987), and Roy Harvey Pearce's treatment of Stevens in *The Continuity of American Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961).

³See, for instance, Paul A. Bové's *Destructive Poetics: Heidegger and Modern American Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), especially 181-89, for a discussion of Stevens, with an emphasis on the various limitations of previous New Critical approaches to his poetics.

⁴Wallace Stevens, “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words,” in *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination* (New York: Vintage, 1951), 29. Further references will be cited as *NA*, with page numbers in parentheses. References to Stevens' other works will be from the following sources: *CP—The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Knopf, 1954); *L—Letters of Wallace Stevens*, ed. Holly Stevens (New York: Knopf, 1966).

⁵Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*, 429.

⁶For a theory that proposes, to the contrary, a reflexive and closed system of literature-as-criticism as the basis of the Romantic “movement,” see Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy's *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*, trans. Philip Barnard and Cheryl Lester (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), and their discussion of the Jena circle. Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy posit early Romanticism as “the inauguration of the *theoretical* project in literature” (2), marked by “its perfect closure upon itself” (11) in response to the Kantian decentering of the subject. For them “romanticism is neither mere ‘literature’ (they invent the concept) nor simply a ‘theory of literature’ (ancient and modern). Rather, it is *theory itself as literature*” (12). This rethinking of the origins and meaning of Romanticism clearly challenges the humanist assumptions of much Anglo-American criticism on the subject.

⁷Bloom, 168, 173.

⁸Joseph Riddel, “Metaphoric Staging: Stevens' Beginning Again of the ‘End of the Book,’” in *Wallace Stevens: A Celebration*, ed. Frank Doggett and Robert Buttel (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 323.

⁹See M. H. Abrams' "The Correspondent Breeze: A Romantic Metaphor," in *English Romantic Poets: Modern Essays in Criticism*, 2nd ed., ed. M. H. Abrams (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 37ff.

¹⁰See, in particular, Helen Vendler's "Stevens' Secrecies: 'The obscurest as, the distant was,'" in *Wallace Stevens: Words Chosen Out of Desire* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1984) for what Vendler calls Stevens' "strategies of concealment, chiefly concealment of the lyric 'I'" (44).

¹¹Percy Bysshe Shelley, "Ode to the West Wind," in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1977), 221-23.

¹²Jerrold E. Hogle, *Shelley's Process: Radical Transference and the Development of His Major Works* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 205.

¹³Helen Vendler, *On Extended Wings: Wallace Stevens' Longer Poems* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969), 176.

¹⁴Vendler, *On Extended Wings*, 178.

¹⁵Shelley, "To a Sky-Lark," in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, 226-29.

¹⁶Cf. Bloom's reading of the Shelleyan overtones in the conclusion of the canto: "The point is precisely Shelleyan, rather than anti-Shelleyan, since both poets lament the absorption into the natural cycle of the language that would transcend cycle" (196). It seems to me that Stevens rejects both sparrow and "jug-throated robin" as models for his own art, precisely because the sparrow represents the Shelleyan poet responding to (or against) the multitude of other natural voices surrounding him.

¹⁷Another allusion may be encoded in the name "Nanzia Nunzio"—to Gabriele d'Annunzio (1863-1938), "decadent" poet, playwright, and political figure. The pun would be particularly fruitful for Stevens in that d'Annunzio, especially in his early "Romantic" poetry, referred frequently to Shelley and eventually wrote an appreciation published in his collected prose (see "Commemorazione di Percy Bysshe Shelley," in *Prose di ricerca* III, Arnoldo Mondadori, 1968, 365-72). The allusion works on another level as well: d'Annunzio (the origins of whose name is itself questioned by his early commentator, Oscar Kuhns, in his 1903 anthology *The Great Poets of Italy*) was adept at rendering ironic the mythologies of Romanticism, punning on his own name as the "herald" of a new mythology; as E. M. Forster describes him in *Two Cheers for Democracy* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1951), "He was always heralding, always heading some sumptuous embassy of his own creation" (239). Especially given his predilection for the heroic pose of "superman," his inscription in the mythological figure of Nanzia Nunzio would render her an explicitly self-ironizing quester of the late Romantic sensibility. Stevens' intentions, however, cannot be known for certain; while he does allude in passing to d'Annunzio in a letter of December 5, 1949 ("the slightly ironic sneer that D'Annunzio always wore" [L 657]), he apparently does not discuss his work itself, and much of d'Annunzio's poetry and prose remains untranslated. I am indebted to Professors Joseph Riddel and Lucia Re for their insights and assistance on this point.

¹⁸Bloom, 199.

¹⁹Riddel, "Metaphoric Staging," 323.

Stevens and Byron on Verrocchio's *Colleoni*

D. L. MACDONALD

BARTOLOMEO COLLEONI OF BERGAMO was possibly the greatest of the Italian *condottieri*. He played a significant if ambivalent role in the Venetian imperial expansion of the fifteenth century, fighting two campaigns for Venice against Milan and two others for Milan against Venice. At his death in 1475, he left Venice about three quarters of a million ducats on condition that it erect a statue in his honor (Norwich 98-99). The Republic gave the commission to Andrea del Verrocchio, who completed the final model and the preparations for casting just before his own death in 1488; the statue was cast and gilded by Alessandro Leopardi and unveiled in 1496 (Passavant 62). It is Verrocchio's masterpiece (see Fig. 1); Ruskin called it "one of the noblest works in Italy" (Whittick 132). It becomes a symbol of nobility in the work of Wallace Stevens and Byron; their responses to it, and especially their errors about it (Stevens' could be called interpretive; Byron's, historical), illustrate not only the relations between two great poets but also, on a larger scale, those between modernism and romanticism, poetry and sculpture, art and politics.

Stevens discusses Verrocchio's statue at length in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," a lecture he delivered at Princeton in May 1941: Colleoni is one of a series of equestrian figures beginning with the charioteer in Plato's *Phaedrus* and progressing through Don Quixote and Andrew Jackson to the riders of Reginald Marsh's *Wooden Horses* (Stevens [NA 11] quotes Craven 586). What Stevens calls the nobility of the statue consists largely of the sense of power it conveys, particularly by its size (it is almost four meters tall), by the musculature and posture of the horse (which is advancing rather than standing still, as was conventional in equestrian statues), and by the armor and rigid posture of Colleoni:

It is like the form of an invincible man, who has come, slowly and boldly, through every warlike opposition of the past and who moves in our midst without dropping the bridle of the powerful horse from his hand, without taking off his helmet and without relaxing the attitude of a warrior of noble origin. What man on whose side the horseman fought could ever be anything but fearless, anything but indomitable? (NA 8)

Stevens' reading of the statue is ambivalent. On the brink of America's entry into the Second World War, Stevens is uncomfortably aware that the indomitable horseman is on the other side. Only a few years before, he had expressed an admiration for Mussolini (*L* 289); now, as if in self-de-

fense, he describes the decline of his admiration as if it were a decline in Italian power. The statue now seems like

a bit of uncommon panache, no longer quite the appropriate thing outdoors . . . It seems, nowadays, what it may very well not have seemed a few years ago, a little overpowering, a little magnificent. (NA 8-9)

The irony that converts “overpowering” and “magnificent” into terms of supercilious dismissal recurs in two poems written the following year. Just as Stevens’ lecture describes Verrocchio’s *Colleoni* as “no longer quite the appropriate thing outdoors,” so his “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction” concludes that a similar equestrian statue, that of General Du Puy, “As a setting for geraniums,” belongs “Among our more vestigial states of mind” (CP 391-92). Colleoni and Du Puy are no longer, as “Examination of the Hero in a Time of War” puts it, “men suited to public ferns” (CP 276): their sculptural style is “too elaborate and too laden with the superlative” (Vendler 158). Bloom speculates that “Stevens perhaps fears for himself the fate of the statue of the General Du Puy” (192). Such a fear would suggest a lingering identification with the statue and what it stands for, an identification that is actually more evident in the lecture than in the later poems: perhaps it could not linger past 7th December 1941. Such a fear would also make irony doubly necessary as a defense.

The intensity of Stevens’ need to dismiss the statue is suggested by the feebleness of the aesthetic grounds he gives for dismissing it: “In this statue, the apposition between the imagination and reality is too favorable to the imagination” (NA 8). The precise sense of the terms “imagination” and “reality” is even harder to pin down here than elsewhere in Stevens; in the most obvious sense, the statue is remarkable for its realism. In contrast to Donatello’s equestrian statue of the *condottiere* Gattamelata (1453), which has idealized classical armor and the head of Julius Caesar (Seymour 62), Verrocchio’s statue has contemporary armor and the face of Colleoni himself, possibly taken from a death mask. The figure’s phallic rigidity, which so impressed Stevens, is necessitated by its armor; and its left shoulder is twisted forward because horsemen actually rode into battle that way, to take the impact of a lance cradled in the right arm of an enemy (Passavant 63-65). “Our difficulty,” Stevens concedes, “is not primarily with any detail. It is primarily with the whole” (NA 8).

The protagonist of Byron’s historical tragedy *Marino Faliero, Doge of Venice* (1820) is also struck by the power conveyed by Verrocchio’s statue, and also finds it aligned against him. Before the play opens, one of the corrupt and arrogant Venetian nobility has defaced the Doge’s throne with an obscene libel against Faliero’s manhood and the honor of his wife. The state’s justices, members of the same class, have given the offender a



Fig. 1. 1254±, Verrocchio, Monument to Colleoni, Venice, Campo S. Giovanni e Paolo. Black and white photo credit: Alinari/Art Resource.

sentence so light as to add to the insult. This brings home to Faliero the many outrages that the nobles have committed, and, because his office (having been undermined by the nobles) no longer carries the power to set things right, he joins the commoners in a conspiracy to exterminate them. At the beginning of the third act, Faliero meets one of the conspirators beneath the statue of Colleoni, startles him by claiming that they are being watched, and then asks him what he sees. The conspirator, Israel Bertuccio, replies:

ISRAEL BERTUCCIO. Only a tall warrior's statue
 Bestriding a proud steed, in the dim light
 Of the dull moon.

DOGE. That warrior was the sire
 Of my sire's fathers, and that statue was
 Decreed to him by the twice rescued city:—
 Think you that he looks down on us, or no?

ISRAEL BERTUCCIO. My Lord, these are mere
 phantasies; there are
 No eyes in marble.

DOGE. But there are in Death.
 I tell thee, man, there is a spirit in
 Such things that acts and sees, unseen, though felt;
 And, if there be a spell to stir the dead,
 'Tis in such deeds as we are now upon.
 Deem'st thou the souls of such a race as mine
 Can rest, when he, their last descendant chief,
 Stands plotting on the brink of their pure graves
 With stung plebeians?

(III.i.87-102)

Faliero's response to the statue, like Stevens', is ambivalent. His situation reflects Byron's own ambivalent situation as an aristocratic revolutionary and a foreign rebel against foreign domination, in Italy at the time that the play was written, and later in Greece (Kelsall 84). Byron also uses his hero to express his ambivalence about English radicalism in the light of the Cato Street conspiracy, a plot to assassinate the Cabinet at the home of the Earl of Harrowby; he learned about it (and its failure) as he was beginning work on his tragedy (Kelsall 104-5; Corbett 69-70).

For Stevens, the statue, however disturbing, is still "a form of such nobility that it has never ceased to magnify us in our own eyes" (NA 8); for Faliero, it is, in part, a symbol of the aristocratic pride which has made him join the conspiracy. The same pride, however, makes him a difficult

conspirator, not only because he despises the “stung plebeians” who are his fellow-conspirators but also because their intended victims are his fellow-aristocrats—his relatives and friends. Byron, similarly, referred to the Cato Street conspirators as “a set of desperate fools” and “awkward butchers,” and to their chief intended victim as “poor Harrowby—in whose house I have been five hundred times—at dinners and parties” (*BLJ* 7: 62). This kind of ambivalence eventually dooms Faliero’s conspiracy when it impels another conspirator to warn one of his noble friends (Corbett 71). Ambivalence—not Byron’s own this time, so that he could disgustedly call it “treachery and disunion”—would also doom the Italian conspiracy of which he was a part, in February 1821 (*BLJ* 8: 102). Primarily, of course, the statue is a symbol of the power opposed to Faliero’s conspiracy, a power which makes ambivalence a fatal weakness. The spirit of Faliero’s ancestor, savior of the Republic, has risen from the dead; it watches him like a spy; it looms above him, ready to crush him. It is as if the statue of the Commendatore, missing from its expected place in *Don Juan*, had appeared here instead.

Unlike Stevens, Byron does not feel the need to deny the effect of the statue as a whole, but he does manifest what Ruskin calls his “ignorant sentimentalism” (Whittick 263) in two errors of detail. The first concerns the medium of the statue: Byron’s Bertuccio refers to it as marble; in fact, it is bronze (cf. North 201-02). For Byron, the statue is a symbol of masculine power, of paternal power: Faliero’s claim that it represents “the sire / Of [his] sire’s fathers” makes it about as paternal as possible. Thus he prefers to make it as hard as possible, and to imagine it as carved with a phallic chisel rather than as cast in a uterine mold, to endow it with a greater metonymic masculinity. (Elsewhere in the play, “marble-chisell’d beauty” is an attribute of male sexuality, associated with the “majesty of superhuman manhood” [II.i.389-91]; in *Beppo*, by contrast, “the rich peasant-cheek of ruddy bronze” is female [354].)

For Stevens too, the statue is a symbol of masculine power, “the form of an invincible man.” He seems, however, to be less interested in the difference between marble and bronze than in a different difference—not between the genders but between the engendered and the ungendered. “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words” begins by citing Plato’s image of the soul as a charioteer, driving a mixed pair of horses: “one of them is noble and of noble origin, and the other is ignoble and of ignoble origin; and, as might be expected, there is a great deal of trouble in managing them” (*NA* 3; cf. Plato 493; 246b). These horses, Stevens remarks approvingly, “are not marble horses, the reference to their breed saves them from being that” (*NA* 5). Marble was never bred, and will never breed. It lacks the eroticism—the warmth, movement, and fertility—of life. Bronze may not be as hard, but it is just as cold and sterile; in “Montrachet-le-Jardin” (1942) the

erotic night “becomes a throat / The hand can touch, neither green bronze nor marble” (CP 261).

The opposition between erotic life and stony or metallic death is the point on which Stevens seems to have felt closest to Byron; at least, he touches on it in the only explicit reference to Byron in his published works. Writing to his wife in 1912, describing a walk in the country, he says:

I had my shirt turned back and my chemisette flung back, precisely like that corsair of hearts, le grand Byron, and I breathed! Of course, when I reached town, and its sorrows, and civilities, I hid my exhilaration, put a noose around my neck, put on my coat and pattered, as neatly as anyone, along the route to the station. (L 177)

The symbol of death here is urban rather than sculptural—the stones of Venice, as it were, rather than the bronzes of Verrocchio—but the symbol of life is the same as in the much later “Montrachet-le-Jardin”: the exposed, touchable throat. In a sense, the conspirators in *Marino Faliero* expose (or oppose) their throats to the statue: *con-spirators* are those who breathe together, as Faliero points out when he stakes his breath on their success (III.ii.204), and when they fail, they end up with nooses around their necks. (In deference to his rank, Faliero himself is beheaded rather than hanged.)

Derrida, in his essay on the *Phaedrus*, refers only in passing to the chariot of the soul (147); but he analyzes Plato’s characterization of speech and writing at some length, and in the terms Stevens uses about the horses: speech is noble and of noble origin (80), and writing is ignoble and of ignoble origin (148); speech is alive (79), and writing is dead, rigid (73), monumental (107), or sculptural (137; cf. North 27-28). Not surprisingly, Stevens conforms to Plato’s linguistic dualism: he opposes the rider to the sound of words in the very title of his lecture (Carroll 138), and he refuses to define what he values in the sound of words because he does not want to impose a scriptorial or sculptural rigidity on it: “I am evading a definition. If it is defined, it will be fixed and it must not be fixed” (NA 34). In “Montrachet-le-Jardin,” he opposes the bronze or marble throat to “The hero’s throat in which the words are spoken” (CP 261; Carroll 143). Byron conforms to the same dualism: he focuses on a libel, a piece of graffiti, a scurrilous writing, as the offense that drives Faliero to revolt. His conspirators rise up on behalf of the old nobility of the breath, of speech, against a usurping script. This parallel between the two texts confirms Frank Lentricchia’s contention that “poetic modernism is round 2 of English romanticism,” a campaign against “the letter that kills” on behalf of living speech, the real language of men (17-19).

In both these texts, however, the dualism is problematic. The sound of words is noble, but so is the rider (or writer). Stevens does not define

nobility because he does not want it to be fixed, but he calls it “an unalterable vibration” (NA 32). The offense against Faliero is a writing, but it is a vocal one, which has “cried shame to every ear in Venice” (I.ii.390), and so “breathed a pestilence” on the city (I.ii.423). The aristocracy is itself a con-spiracy, “one long chain; one mass, one breath, one body” (III.ii.34), and the “spirit” that Faliero sees in the statue is part of this con-spiracy (III.i.95): as Lentricchia concedes, there is also an “aural imperialis[m],” a usurping speech (11). These ambivalences are reflected in the political ambivalences in the two works, and even more clearly reflected in their generic ambivalence: one is a published lecture (NA vii; cf. Lacan 146-47), the other a closet drama (CPW 4: 305).

The second historical error in Byron’s historical tragedy concerns the date and provenance of the statue; it is less an error than a deliberate distortion. “The equestrian statue,” Byron says in the preface to the play, “is not . . . of a Faliero, but of some other now obsolete warrior, although of a later date” (CPW 4: 304). The action of the play takes place in 1355, long before either Colleoni or Verrocchio was born.

Byron mentions some other, lesser distortions of time and space in a discussion of the unities in his preface. Even in “real life” or the historical record, the time that elapsed between the inception of the conspiracy and the execution of the conspirators was “wonderfully short,” but Byron has shortened it further, to less than twenty-four hours. Space, however, he has not contracted but expanded: all the meetings between Faliero and the other conspirators actually took place in the Ducal palace, but Byron has taken the Doge outside, violating both the historical record and the unity of place to avoid monotony—and to confront Faliero with the statue of Colleoni (CPW 4: 306).

Byron’s strict observance of the unity of time helps to emphasize his hero’s special relationship to time (Ehrstine 33-34). Near the beginning of the play, the Duchess explains that “Time has but little power” over her husband (II.i.9-14); as the conspiracy unfolds, he reaches for a power over time. The conspirator Bertram, trying to warn his patrician friend without betraying his plebeian comrades, says darkly that “Time / Has changed his slow scythe for the two-edged sword” (IV.i.156-57). If the conspiracy had succeeded, Faliero tells his nephew, one moment “would have changed the face of ages”; since it has failed, the moment has given them to eternity instead (IV.ii.275-76). By the last act, Faliero has “done with Time” (V.ii.6). He tells his wife: “I stand within eternity, and see / Into eternity” (V.ii.88-89). He reveals what he sees there in his last speech, an elaborate prophecy of the decline that Venice will undergo in the five centuries between his time and Byron’s. In this context, his confrontation with the statue only a century and a half before it was completed may not seem like such a serious anachronism.

Stevens, by contrast, displays an acute sensitivity to time and space in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words." He compares Verrocchio's statue of Colleoni with Clark Mills's statue of Andrew Jackson, "an object occupying a position as remarkable as any that can be found in the United States"—in Lafayette Square, opposite the White House—"in which there is not the slightest trace of the imagination" (NA 11). The comparison suggests that "the genius of Verrocchio and of the Renaissance" (NA 8) deserved a more appropriate reality—a better subject than Colleoni and even a better setting than Venice—and that Jackson and Lafayette Square deserved a better imagination than Mills's:

We are bound to think that Colleoni, as a mercenary, was a much less formidable man than General Jackson, that he meant less to fewer people and that, if Verrocchio could have applied his prodigious poetry to Jackson, the whole American outlook today might be imperial. (NA 10)

In 1919, according to Lentricchia, Stevens was an anti-imperialist (20-21); in 1941, he seems to regret that a disjunction of imagination and reality has left the American outlook non-imperial. Perhaps he still nurses a secret admiration for Mussolini; perhaps he feels the need for an anti-imperialist imperialism to oppose to Mussolini's unambiguous variety (Lentricchia 119), for an American, democratic (well, Republican) nobility to oppose to the nobility of Italian fascism—for "a violence from within that protects us from a violence without" (NA 36; cf. Bates 193).

Stevens is certainly right about how little Colleoni meant to the Venetians. Far from decreeing the statue to him out of gratitude, as Faliero asserts, they commissioned it with funds he had left them for the purpose. In fact, having accepted his bequest, they violated the terms of his will: he had stipulated the Piazza di San Marco (the Venetian equivalent of Lafayette Square) as the setting for his statue, an honor the Venetians considered excessive; so they had it erected outside the Scuola di San Marco instead (Norwich 99). Stevens' sensitivity to setting and occasion—to place and time—is characteristic of all his work. He thought of it as a problem. In one of the most notorious of his "Adagia," he confessed: "Life is an affair of people not of places. But for me life is an affair of places and that is the trouble" (OP 185).

For Byron, by contrast, life is an affair of people rather than of places. In "Imagination as Value" (1948), Stevens notes that "the great poems of heaven and hell have been written and the great poem of the earth remains to be written" (NA 142); in a defense of *Don Juan*, Byron uses a parallel argument, but puts it in personal terms instead of terms of place: "you have so many 'divine' poems, is it nothing to have written a *Human* one?" (BLJ 6: 105). The distortion in *Marino Faliero* is consistent with this orien-

tation, slighting the facts of time and place in order to stress Faliero's personal, Oedipal conflict with his ancestry.

But people are themselves partly an affair of places: "The natives of the rain are rainy men," as Stevens puts it in his most Byronic poem, "The Comedian as the Letter C" (CP 37); "I live not in myself, but I become / Portion of that around me," as Byron puts it in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, his most Stevensian poem (III.72). And Oedipal conflicts are largely a matter of time. Byron's play consistently confuses the Oedipal issues by inverting their temporality. Faliero invokes a statue from the future as a symbol of his paternal past. He is a very old man: most of the aristocrats he rebels against are young enough to be his sons, and as his nominal subjects they are his symbolic sons; but in rebelling against them, he assumes the role of the son.

The play further confuses these issues by a series of allusions to illegitimacy (*BLJ* 6: 138), which raise the question of whether there is any real relation between so-called fathers and sons, let alone which are which. Faliero is provoked to revolt by the suggestion that he is impotent and his wife is unfaithful. As an alternate revenge when his revolt fails, he prophesies paradoxically that the descendants of the Venetian aristocracy will not be descendants at all, but bastards, who,

Proud of some name they have disgraced, or sprung
From an adulteress boastful of her guilt
With some large gondolier or foreign soldier,
Shall bear about their bastardy in triumph
To the third spurious generation . . .

(V.iii.69-73)

Not only was Colleoni not one of Faliero's ancestors, he was not in any sense one of his descendants. He was a "foreign soldier," a bastard or cuckoo Venetian. He was a Bergamask—as, in the play, is Bertram, the conspirator who betrays the conspiracy. It seems appropriate that Bertram should be a bastard, but even the faithful conspirators are cuckoos at best; as Bertuccio promises the Doge, "Not one of all those strangers . . . / But will regard thee with a filial feeling" (I.ii.561-62). In making Faliero a timeless figure, Byron has cut him off from the generational relations that give a human significance to time, condemning him (unlike Childe Harold) to "live . . . in [him]self." Faliero's timelessness gives this historical tragedy a curiously ahistorical quality, which not only accounts for Byron's historical errors about the statue but also expresses "the grand illusion of every Romantic poet," the "idea that poetry . . . can set one free of the ruins of history" (McGann 137).

Byron's ambivalence about legitimacy and bastardy, like his ambivalence about speech (or spirit) and writing (or sculpture), is reflected further

in the ambiguous genre of his work. He insists in the Preface that his drama is a legitimate tragedy. Its legitimacy, however, cuts it off from its literary ancestors: it makes “a nearer approach to unity than the irregularity, which is the reproach of the English theatrical compositions” (CPW 4: 305-6). In a letter to his publisher (actually with reference to a later and even more legitimate play), Byron describes his dramatic method as “very unlike Shakespeare—and so much the better in one sense—for I look upon him to be the *worst* of models—though the most extraordinary of writers” (BLJ 8: 152). The motivation of *Marino Faliero* helps to make it unlike Shakespeare: Byron decided not to make his hero a jealous husband, partly because Shakespeare had already done so in *his* Venetian tragedy (CPW 304).

Superficially, Stevens’ lecture displays a similar disjunction. If *Marino Faliero* is a French neo-classical tragedy written in English in Italy, “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words” is a French lecture read in English in the United States. It was delivered as part of the first series of *Mesures* lectures, which were sponsored, with Stevens’ help and encouragement, by his friend Henry Church (Bates 197-98; Brazeau 183 n). Church had lived in France, and edited the little magazine *Mesures*, until 1939. The lectures were his attempt to keep French literary culture alive in exile, or at least to make himself “forgetful of the loss of Paris,” as Stevens put it (L 375). No doubt these circumstances contributed to the sense of crisis that informed Stevens’ reading of the statue (cf. Lentricchia 5).

The crucial difference is that Stevens, unlike Byron, had not cut himself off from his literary ancestors, or exiled himself (cf. McGann 110). It was Henry Church and *Mesures* that were in exile. Bringing the *Mesures* lectures to the United States may have been an act of “aesthetic imperialis[m]” not entirely unlike importing the French paintings or Mandarin tea that Stevens was fond of (cf. Lentricchia 232-33), but in 1941, it was an anti-imperialist aesthetic imperialism (cf. Lentricchia 238).

As his approving reference to the breed of Plato’s horses may suggest, Stevens shares the anxiety over legitimacy, or filiation, characteristic of modernism (Said 16-17). The longing for the mother expressed in “Sunday Morning” (CP 69; Lentricchia 175-76), the longing for heirs expressed in “A Postcard from the Volcano” (CP 158-59; Lentricchia 194-95), even Stevens’ obsessional genealogical researches, suggest the same thing. But unlike Byron (or, say, Eliot), he does not try to assuage this anxiety by affiliation with alien traditions (French neo-classicism, Italian mock-epic, and Greek insurrectionism, or classicism, royalism, and Anglo-Catholicism); instead, he tries to conserve the tradition he recognizes as his own. (It is, to be sure, an imperial tradition, which can colonize both English romanticism and French modernism.)

Marx's daughter recalled her father as saying that those who understood and loved Byron "rejoice[d] that [he] died at thirty-six, because if he had lived he would have become a reactionary *bourgeois*" (Aveling 4). These seem like hard words for a man who did, after all, give his life to an anti-imperialist revolution, though it is true that the decline of the Turkish empire confirmed the triumph of the British one (McGann 124-25). Perhaps if he had lived another hundred years he would have become an affiliated modernist, but he was wise enough not to.

At the climax of "The Aspern Papers," the deplorable narrator (a modern American aesthetic imperialist obsessed with an English romantic) flees from the overtures of Miss Tita and finds himself before the statue of Colleoni. He deftly encapsulates the ambivalence that it seems to provoke, first calling it "incomparable" and then, almost immediately, comparing it to the statue of Marcus Aurelius in Rome. On the whole, however, he treats Colleoni with more tact than he has Miss Tita and her aunt: "if he were thinking of battles and stratagems they were of a different quality from any I had to tell him of. He could not direct me what to do, gaze up at him as I might" (184). Byron and Stevens, by contrast, have invited him down from his pedestal to take part in their own battles and stratagems—as no doubt I have too, in ways I'm not yet aware of. As Lentricchia points out, comparison, like all interpretation, takes place "not on the realist's terra firma but in active ideological contest to shape our culture's sense of history" (21).

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“Velocities of Change”: Exceeding Excess in “Credences of Summer” and “The Auroras of Autumn”

DAVID R. JARRAWAY

Solidarity has to be constructed out of little pieces, rather than found already waiting, in the form of an ur-language which all of us recognize when we hear it.

—Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*

It seems to me an interesting idea: that is to say, the idea that we live in the description of a place and not in the place itself, and in every vital sense we do.

—Wallace Stevens, *Letters*

[One] does not believe in the disaster. One cannot believe in it, whether one lives or dies. Commensurate with it there is no faith, and at the same time a sort of disinterest, detached from the disaster. Night; white, sleepless night—such is the disaster: the night lacking darkness, but brightened by no light.

—Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*

I

ONE OF THE MOST CURIOUS aspects of Wallace Stevens' "Credences of Summer" (1946) is the way the poet has chosen to position the text in the fifth book of his *Collected Poems*. The plural in the title seems to imply a rousing invocation to belief, but upon closer inspection, the poem's affirmations become slightly unhinged when we notice that it is "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" from 1942 which Stevens has elected to close out that book. By installing a gaping whole—notes toward some non-Truth—where we might have expected a sum of the parts to be lodged, Stevens not only problematizes severely the transcendence promised in the volume's title, *Transport to Summer*, but he also undercuts even further the orthodox season naturally underlying such credences, turning belief itself into somewhat of a paradox. What is at stake in the whole process of ironization in this and in Stevens' subsequent work, as the present essay will only begin to suggest, is a radical reconceptualization of language in the transport of belief—a reformulation subsumed under the "gaiety of language" in Stevens' Nietzschean version of it from 1944,¹ though very much underway, thanks to the "Notes," prior to that point. One consequently is inclined to think that the work of Stevens' *Transport*

singularly foregrounded by “Credences of Summer” is intended to be honored more in the breach than the observance in Shakespeare’s phrase, which helps to explain “Credences”’ own position of anti-climax, two brief lyrics shy of the supremely ironic “Notes.” Thus, Helen Vendler’s ascriptions of “detachment” and lost “serenity” (235-36), and Harold Bloom’s of “irony or discontinuous allegorical movement” (245) quite accurately portray a much darker text than its lighthearted pastoralism in the season of summer might initially tend to warrant. Moreover, how to explain the “Credences of Summer” in a volume strenuously championing “Description *without* Place” (CP 339; emphasis added) would perhaps be most ironic of all, if it were not for the placement of the companion text, “The Auroras of Autumn,” which Stevens chose to open and title his final, single volume of verse published in 1950. Some important critical leverage might in the end be gained on the poet’s later work, and the role he conceives the gaiety of language to be enacting within in it, by pursuing here the curious relation between Stevens’ companion poems actually composed within a year of each other (1946-1947), and specifically, by addressing the thematization of an excessively ironical argument in play between them.

That Stevens’ later poetry should more and more privilege an *ironic* enunciation, rather than any of the other rhetorical wagers established in Kenneth Burke’s famous tetrad of Master Tropes (503-17), including (additionally) metaphor, metonymy, and synecdoche—such an ironic enunciation ought not to surprise us in the later phases of the poet’s work once past *Parts of a World* (1942). After all, as Donna Haraway has recently observed, “Irony is about contradictions that do not resolve into larger wholes, even dialectically, about the tension of holding incompatible things together because both or all are necessary and true” (“Manifesto” 173). “In the sum of the parts,” as Stevens himself had argued as early as 1938, “there are only the parts” (CP 204). Now the specific rhetorical negotiation between parts and wholes, the Aristotelian *epiphora* of transport which Paul Ricoeur refers to as the “transaction between contexts” (80, 17-18), we can readily see fading into the background in Stevens’ writing prior to *Parts*. Perhaps we see this even more readily following Hayden White in the *Tropics of Discourse* (72-73), since Metaphor, which establishes meaning in terms of “equivalence or identity,” and the Secondary Forms of metonymy (whole to part) and synecdoche (part to whole) are, respectively, the rhetoric of immanence and transcendence of *Harmonium* and *Ideas of Order*. Viewed *diachronically*, rather than *synchronically*, this leaves us, similarly, with the rhetorical closure of a “cycle” of conventional Romance as Stevens saw it early on (e.g., “Sailing After Lunch” [CP 120]), when the two books are fitted structurally together.² Gradually, however, as a new Romance of the Precise outlined by Stevens in 1946 (“Adult Epigram” [CP 353]) begins to overtake the elisions of the tired

structural one, starting with "The Man with the Blue Guitar," and working its way slowly toward a more riddling authentication in Stevens' "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" by way of much of the verbal experimentation in *Parts of a World*, nothing less than the problematic rhetorical strategy of irony might suit Stevens' project. For once, the thematization of Romance—the enigmatic "ever-never-changing same" (CP 353)—shifts from a literal quest to a rhetorical question past the "Notes," what is signal to the deregulation of former expressive protocols, in Hayden White's words once again, is "a kind of attitude towards knowledge itself which is implicitly critical of all forms of metaphorical identification, reduction, or integration of phenomena . . . underlying and sanctioning skepticism as an explanatory tactic . . . and either agnosticism or cynicism as a moral posture" (73-74). Scepticism, agnosticism, and cynicism, of course, in this decidedly new "poststructural" context in which we may finally be invited to take up Stevens' last work, all suggest a further ironization for his "Credences of Summer." And as the quest for faith, like Stevens' new Romance, itself becomes the question of belief, "belief[] beyond belief" as Stevens puts it in "Flyer's Fall" (CP 336), we perhaps also begin to see his new discourse forming a significant intersection with the post-doctrinal agenda of contemporary a/theology. For it is the program of current a/theological discourse to question *all* determinate or theocentric forms of faith, a point to which we shall return in the second section of this essay.

For now, we might first want to begin to understand that "Credences of Summer," as the honorific text of Stevens' fifth book of collected verse, ironizes its conclusion in the way that all metaphorical transport more generally is inclined to be ironized, by the modality of speech that turns every form of belief into its own self-criticism. Hence, the poem's devolution to "The Auroras" hard by in the *Collected Poems*, expressing a relationship between the two texts in terms of a "suspensive irony." The term is Alan Wilde's, and describes a relation which invites the "willingness to live with uncertainty, to tolerate and, in some cases, to welcome a world seen as random and multiple, even, at times, absurd" (44-48). Such a relation is accurate as far as it goes from the point of view irony's tropological wager. But in its privileging of irony alone, it significantly misrepresents the role of metaphor which Stevens is insistent upon reformulating in his later work mentioned earlier, and about which the poet would continue to theorize practically to his last composition.

In the important essay "Three Academic Pieces," for instance, completed at the time he was at work on the companion poems (1947), Stevens is quite in accord with Burke on "a gradus ad Metaphoram" of tropological expressiveness (his terms are Hayden White's modal radicals of "emplotment": "comic, tragic, tragic-comic" [ironic?], etc.), and also on the view that metaphor, in its conventional and restricted economic sense, tends

toward some ultimate form of meaning expressive of equivalence or “identity” (NA 81, 71-72). Recognizing the contradiction at the very heart of what Paul Ricoeur would term the substitution-theory of metaphor, by which the successive interchanges within the ever-increasing transport of verbal meaning to some terminus of totalizing identity would find metaphor doing away with itself entirely, Stevens, rather than suspend the operation of metaphor altogether, would prefer to refigure it, open it out to a more general economy. He calls this more elliptical economy “resemblance,” and divorcing it from a process of mere mechanical imitation integral with the repetitions of figural identification—“We are not dealing with identity . . . identity is the vanishing-point of resemblance,” he states emphatically (NA 72)—Stevens connects “resemblance” to the activity of incessant creation to be found in nature, whose own prodigies of “metamorphosis” serve as an analogue to the “activity of the imagination . . . the imagination [that] is life” (NA 73). “Resemblance,” therefore, gives us a take on metaphor in its *productive* rather than its *reductive* sense. Stevens, recurring to a central term we may also recall from “Description without Place,” refers to this as “intensification,” that is, “a sense of reality keen enough to be in excess of the normal sense of reality” (NA 79), just as the intermediacy of metamorphosis could be said to exceed the immediacy of identity. From a strictly interpretive point of view, moreover, an interactive and genetic intermediacy-theory of metaphor, in contrast to a substitutive and nominal immediacy one, represents a boon to the reader, for as Paul Ricoeur again notes, it “lays the foundation for the possibility of paraphrasing a metaphor by means of other words” (66), in just the way that Stevens’ own conception of “resemblance,” as opposed to identity, might pre-scribe. Writes Ricoeur: “The difference between trivial metaphor and poetic metaphor is not that one can be paraphrased and the other not, but that the paraphrase of the latter is without end. It is endless precisely because it can always spring back to life . . . [Furthermore] this role cannot come to light unless one turns away from the alliance between resemblance and substitution . . . towards a functioning that is inseparable from the instance of discourse constitutive of the sentence . . . [for] if it serves some purpose in metaphor, resemblance must be a characteristic of the attribution of predicates and not of the substitution of names” (188, 194).³ “[I]t is not too extravagant,” therefore (Stevens concludes the prose portion of “Three Academic Pieces”), “to think of resemblances and of the repetitions of resemblances as a *source* of the ideal” (NA 81; emphasis added).

It follows that this notion of “resemblance,” particularly in its ascription as a generative source of repetition, becomes another of Stevens’ Motives for Metaphor from his middle- and late-period, and thus takes its place right alongside terms such as intensity just mentioned, and others like intimation and style (CP 288, 345), in several of metaphor’s “‘moments of

enlargement" (CP 298). Even further, "resemblance," in the fecundating sense of attributive predication, also compels us to revise the sense of irony supervening the relations between Stevens' later texts, helping us to break it out of its own somewhat restrictive economy of suspensive qualification, and skeptical or perhaps even cynical engagement in the theories of Wilde and White rehearsed previously. Correspondingly, "resemblance" of an interactive and intermediating kind sensitizes us to a more boldly self-assertive form of "ironism" which Richard Rorty has lately been pleased to find, in a rather Stevensian mood, resulting from "awareness of the power of re-description," a re-description, that is, which in the constant search for a better and better vocabulary with which to articulate "existing webs of belief and desire," comes more and more to be "dominated by metaphors of making rather than finding, of diversification and novelty rather than convergence to the antecedently present" (89, 84, 77, 73), or in Stevens' own terms, a vocabulary dominated by the repetitions of resemblance rather than by the representations of identity. Thus, the relation of "Credences of Summer" to the larger text of *Transport to Summer*, and beyond that, to *The Auroras of Autumn* which comes to take their place, boils down, once again, to an act of choice between competing vocabularies which "resemblance" empowers the poet, as the ironical Metaphysician in the Dark (CP 240), to make, "simply by playing the new off against the old":

I call people of this sort "ironists" [Rorty further elaborates] because their realization that anything can be made to look good or bad by being re-described, and their renunciation of the attempt to formulate criteria of choice between final vocabularies, puts them in the position which Sartre called "meta-stable": never quite able to take themselves seriously because always aware that the terms in which they describe themselves are subject to change, always aware of the contingency and fragility of their final vocabularies, and thus of their selves. (73-74)

In a phrase later to be unpacked in "The Auroras of Autumn," Stevens might refer to the contingency of the ironist's descriptions here as the "velocities of change" (CP 414), for only "[t]he incredible" underwriting such contingency in a final ironization of credence—"the truth . . . not the respect of one, / But always of many things"—gives the Metaphysician in the Dark "a purpose to believe" (NA 85).

To sum up: while "Credences of Summer" is open only to an ironic interpretation by this late stage in Stevens' linguistic project, it is assuredly the *force* of the ironic articulation rather than its rhetorical *form* that can really be of any interest to us. Only irony conceived in this doubly "ironic" way can explain its own tolerance for "metaphors of making rather than

finding," that is, for a differentiating "resemblance" in contrast to an identifying "substitution." In contrast to form as well, there is no universal, generalizable Truth against which to measure the experience of this articulation. There is available to us only the force of yet another articulation, such as we shall later encounter in the text of "The Auroras of Autumn" composed so soon after "Credences," and then a subsequent articulation after that, and so forth. Thus, when credence is opened out from the objects of belief to the questions of event in this way, "One poem proves another and the whole," as Stevens will later remark in "A Primitive Like an Orb" (CP 441).

But even much before he reaches "The Auroras of Autumn," Stevens as master-ironist is already testing the articulative limits of "Credences," by playing its new vocabulary off against a very much older one in the precedent mythos of the *locus amoenus*. In this regard, he is rather remarkably like Roland Barthes in his own later writing, "tracing paths from received opinion to what he calls *utopias of language*, whose description shows both what it is desirable to change within the status quo and what reconceptions are possible" (Wiseman 295). What precisely, in Stevens' own "utopia of language," is the relation between the status quo and the requirement for re-description of the ironist bent on the velocity for change? David Evett, following closely the landmark studies of E. R. Curtius, Stanley Stewart, and A. Bartlett Giametti among others, summarizes the chief features of the *topos* as it is handled in the classical texts of Theocritus, Mantuan, and the Song of Songs, and later, by writers such as Edmund Spenser and Andrew Marvell. Evett writes:

the *locus amoenus* is comprised of three essential elements: trees, grass, and water. It is a landscape of the mind, an aid to conceptualization, imitated from books, not life, and if it is based on a real place, that place assumes an extraordinary dimension. The *topos* as such has a structural function, which is synchronous, not diachronous; it operates as a single homogeneous rhetorical member. But in the course of historical development it comes to have certain traditional expressive capabilities as well, to connote any or all of the categories of refection, numinous creativity or generation, and eroticism . . . [Most importantly], [w]ithin the *locus* the lover loves but does not kiss; the weary shepherd rests; the pastoral melancholiac is enabled to reflect on the mutability of all things precisely because the *topos* is, both intrinsically and rhetorically, a refuge from time, a node in a line. (507a, 511b)

On the most superficial, interpretive level, Stevens' "Credences of Summer" plays out most of the archetypal features of the *locus amoenus* pre-

sented in Evett's model. In the opening canto, time has reached the apogee of midsummer, the high point between the infuriations of spring and the first, brisk inhalations of autumn. Accordingly, the initial thematics of the text fall heavily upon growth and fecundity (soft grass, heavy roses, young broods), upon peace and leisure as "the mind lays by its trouble," and most important of all, upon the *locus's* translation to the changeless and perdurable: "the last day of a certain year / Beyond which there is nothing left of time" (CP 372). Within this scope of timeless transport, imagination is totalized and self-presence realized, in the image of the hieratic family-circle:

There is nothing more inscribed nor thought nor felt
 And this must comfort the heart's core against
 Its false disasters—these fathers standing round,
 These mothers touching, speaking, being near,
 These lovers waiting in the soft dry grass.
 (CP 372)

In canto III the complete refuge from time is figured as "green's green apogee," and symbolized by a natural tower reminiscent of the Tree (identified with the Cross) in the Song of Songs, and Mantuan's tall tower constructed in a marsh, according to his *Eclogues*. As a total point of survey—"Axis of everything"—the tower, located itself atop a final mountain, contracts all sense experience into that which can be seen. But even the visionary eye seems supererogatory in this pastoral retreat, for the old man standing atop the tower "reads no book" (CP 374). Such "[t]hings certain sustaining us in certainty" (CP 375), an absolute certainty the pursuit of which Vincent Descombes characterizes as the inaugural of Modern Philosophy (1), Stevens heralds as the end to *all thought*, with the achievement of the "huge decorum," in the "completed scene" of the *locus amoenus* at the final canto (CP 378).

Or does he? With this scenic insinuation of the Theater of Trope brought forward from the 1942 "Notes" (CP 397), and further elaborated in canto X by the personae of summer as "characters" playing roles and speaking parts in the *locus*, Stevens subtly begins to alter the entire nature of the *topos*, calling attention more to the factitious as opposed to the factual provenance of its structural design. With this alteration in the final canto, for instance, we notice a radical shift in the time-sense of the poem: one becomes free only "for a moment," instead of being removed eternally from "malice and sudden cry" (CP 378). And with this elongation of the poem's temporal sense, there also occurs a broadening and more textured presentation of narrative materials: the pastoral's characters are mottled—"half pales of red, / Half pales of green." "[K]notted, sashed and seamed" in this way, they fit into summer's own "mottled mood" rather as parts

than as continuous and completed wholes. They thus come to challenge the synchronous and homogeneous rhetoricity of the *locus*'s transcendent function, tending to side more with their "inhuman author," who is somewhat absurdly given to meditate their speeches "late at night" even though he cannot hear them, much less see them. Hence, the green's green apogee earlier marking a final recognition and universalization of the real, in the end, curiously becomes transformed into "the apogee of non-meaning," in Vincent Descombes' strikingly similar phrase: "For there is nothing left to be done (therefore all action is absurd), nor anything left to be said (therefore all speech is insignificant)" (112).⁴ At such a pass, the pastoral *topos* underwriting "Credences," like so many of the preceding texts subscribing to the transport of summer—"Red Fern," "Holiday in Reality," "Late Hymn from the Myrrh-Mountain"—pastoralism itself, then, would appear also to have entered into the ironization of belief.

Suddenly, other questions begin to creep out from the darkened corners of the present poem's disarticulations. Can the female presence, for example, in canto V, who makes all her compeers in this pastoral retreat "look down," possibly sustain, to borrow Evett's terminology once again, the "intrinsic propriety" of the *topos* as an "emblem of rest, relaxation, [and] retirement," and "a vessel for essentially religious feelings" (511b, 506a)? Is the queen, as the canto asks, "humble as she seems to be" (CP 374)? And if her charitable majesty seems questionable, can the "bristling soldier" who acts as consort actually come to represent the race of men through the sheer strength of "heroic power" alone in such a leisured setting? As such questions as these begin to mount, however, the reader is invited to consider at a more complex level of interpretation whether or not the sources of creativity and generation of the *locus amoenus* itself are at all as numinous as they are given out to be, whether, in fact, they too might not also have their apparently seamless provenance in more contingent acts of will and spontaneous displays of expression. How does any "object" or so-called "real thing"—"Fully made, fully apparent, fully found," as canto VII describes it (CP 376)—come to be formed or represented in an act of human perception, *except* through the articulation of a will to power? As the canto goes on to reveal, in desiring to presence any object in order to close the gap between ego and other, and eliminate the prolongations of desire entirely in the "capture" of meaning, the "concentred self," time and time again, re-enacts a triple-gesture of power over the object (captivation, first; then, subjugation; finally, proclamation) in order that it may be brought within the purview of the mind's "savage scrutiny" (CP 376). Stevens' point here is precisely that of Roland Barthes: "To speak, and, with even greater reason, to utter a discourse is not, as is too often repeated, to communicate; it is *to subjugate*: the whole language is a generalized *rection*" (460). Or, as Foucault would say, "knowledge follows the advances

of power . . ." (*Discipline* 204; cf. also Weber 9, 17). Every language-game, consequently, is a verbal power-play. Either selves avert objects, or are themselves averted in the ancient cycle of desire. In either case, meaning is never an ideal of equivalence, but instead, an effect of resemblance, what Stevens alludes to in "Esthétique du Mal" as the in-bar and ex-bar of transparent representation (*CP* 317). So that no matter how far into the woods we choose to sing our songs in order to feel secure in face of their objects, according to the present text, they must always remain "unreal" (*CP* 376). Or at any rate, compel us to problematize "the entire notion of reference . . . [and its] traditional realist transparency" (Hutcheon 229).

In canto VIII, therefore, when the trumpet of morning blows through the sky, it heralds a quite different apocalypse than the one scanned back in canto VI. Proclaiming neither the visible's "sharp, illustrious scene" nor the "more than visible," by which logic even the *locus amoenus* itself should be done away with, the trumpet signals what has made *both* possible, as the canto states (*CP* 376). It does this through the sheer might of its "resounding cry," making plain in sight and memory the powers at stake as the different "stratagems / Of the spirit," what Derrida perhaps might call the "protocols of reading" (*Margins* 246, 7; see also *Writing* 276, Weber 45), compete for expressive dominance. But the trumpet also supposes that there exists a similar "di[-]vision" of expressive protocols in the human mind, for this, after all, is "*diction's way*" (*CP* 377; emphasis added). Aware of its inherent power of resemblance in this fashion, the mind's own "cry as clarion" is less likely now to fixate upon the credence of the singular personage—the queen or her consort in canto V, the encircled king in canto VI, or even the "thrice concentred self" in canto VII. Hearing in that re-sounding cry the din of "ten thousand tumblers tumbling down" in canto VIII (*CP* 376), the mind is more prone to conceive of the personage "in a multitude," persuaded now by the generative difference that allows it to grow "venerable in the unreal" (*CP* 377), rather than atrophy metaphysically in the Real (or Ideal). This generative power, so the argument continues in canto IX, is what has made it possible for a "complex of emotions" (*CP* 377) such as the soft and civil *locus amoenus* itself to come into being. But it will also cause this complex to fall apart, as another "complex of other emotions" which may not be quite "So soft, so civil"—"The Auroras of Autumn," as we shall see momentarily—comes to take its place. Already, "[t]he gardener's cat is dead, the gardener gone / And last year's garden grows salacious weeds" (*CP* 377), so that even as suave bush and polished beast continue to be regnant, the velocities of change have always already contrived for a new stratagem of the spirit to take their place, and hence, open the instrumentality of the pastoral form to question. This speed of a becoming, what the canto refers to as "the spirit of the arranged" and "the fund of life and death" (*CP* 377), is imaged

aurally, once again, in the sound made by a cock-robin. And it is likely its song forms “no[] part of the listener’s own sense” mainly because the credences of summer, conventionally visioned in the pastoral *topos*, are still hung up on metaphysical being. But just as the civil bird’s bean-pole comes to replace the natural tower and final mountain previously, so even the *mythos* of summer, as in Foucault’s words “a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an *opposing strategy*” (*History* 101), must yield to what Rorty aptly terms “the ironist’s ability to exploit the possibilities of massive description,” and to the “requests for concrete alternatives and programs”—poetical asseveration held open to an “historically conditioned vocabulary,” in other words (78, 87, 88). Stevens’ distribution rather than substitution of emotional complexes⁵ or verbal assemblages in this canto—“*douceurs*, / *Tristesses*” is an especially telling phrase (*CP* 377)—makes the point precisely. These, then, become the plurivalent credences of the poem’s title, whose availability angles *less* for the sanctioning of *single* options than for our freedom to choose among those options themselves, as time, place, and circumstance warrant. But the freedom to choose becomes a fully realized possibility only once past its repression in the poem’s early cantos, and most especially a possibility at its close, when their manner and mood finally turn mottled, and summer finally turns “whole” (*CP* 378).⁶

Perhaps the greatest repression of discursive options occurs in canto II:

Postpone the anatomy of summer, as
 The physical pine, the metaphysical pine.
 Let’s see the very thing and nothing else.
 Let’s see it with the hottest fire of sight.
 Burn everything not part of it to ash.

Trace the gold sun about the whitened sky
 Without evasion by a single metaphor.
 Look at it in its essential barrenness
 And say this, this is the centre that I seek.

(*CP* 373)

The poem’s quite militant intention to do away with the annoying evasions of metaphor in order to get at the essential meaning represented by the *locus*, to fix it, as the canto goes on to say, in “an eternal foliage” and an “arrested peace,” ought to strike the reader as extraordinarily contradictory in a poem about the *douceurs* of summer. But such an excessively violent reaction given out by all the imperatives—postpone, burn, trace, look, etc.—might seem to be antithetical to the pastoral ethos, until we realize that Stevens’ text is not really about the pastoral at all. It is about the “reality” of pastoral—“the very thing” in the above passage—and how such verbal orders, as expressions of human desire, come to be constructed

(see Montrose). From this perspective, such a severe reaction would be quite in order since reality, as Bruno Latour has pointed out in a related context, is cognate with the Latin word *res*: that which resists. And what does it resist, Latour asks? "*Trials of strength*. If in a given situation, no dissenter is able to modify the shape of a new object, then that's it, it is reality, at least for as long as the trials of strength are not modified" (93). What's interesting (dare we say, ironic?) about the trials of strength in the above citation is the fact that the barrenness demanded for the fertile thing, in a place of permanence that would exile desire completely, can itself only turn out to be *another* "reality," either physical or metaphysical, that is, *another* evasion by metaphor, in a whole movable host of metaphors, to recur to Nietzsche's well-travelled phrase. The real barrenness, then, turns out perhaps to be the "right ignorance" (CP 373) that thinks such permanence can be essentialized. But if there is any *right* ignorance to be believed, it is more likely one that might unknowingly give credence to the perennial fertility of the thing, and how variously its meaning might be constructed, a Heideggerian argument that Stevens pursues more rigorously in "Man Carrying Thing" from the same year (CP 350). For it is that kind of right ignorance that can continue to imagine that a "change [were] still possible" (CP 373).

The hope, nonetheless, is exceedingly precarious. For once persuaded of uncertain *origins*, a foundationalist predisposition is just as likely to balk at indeterminate *ends*, "the distant" in canto IV of "Credences of Summer," for whose enigmas the clairvoyant eye evinces such a low tolerance (CP 374). This was Andrew Marvell's breaking-point in his own ironization of the pastoral *locus*. Having allowed himself in *Upon Appleton House* to indulge the *topos* with the "intellectual analysis," as David Evett observes, "of mind celebrating its own power, of domination and distance, of art" (all of Stevens' *own* privileged terms we should note), Marvell capitulates to an attitude "of stasis, of acquiescence, of awe, of worship" appropriate to the ultimate Truth he thinks his wrestling with a burdensome convention has led him when "the *topos* finally succeeds in reasserting its rhetorical and mythic totality" (512a, 513a). Stevens' argument for metaphorical resemblance would push his discourse further, acknowledging that such mythic totalization is but "One of the limits of reality" (CP 374). Still, the leap from the clairvoyant eye to the "mingling of colors at a festival" in a language without words is likely to leave the expectant reader rather dumbfounded by all those pastoral vistas piled in the mows and hived in the trees of Oley, as the poem concludes. At such a point it must have struck Stevens that even his "Credences" might stop—"The utmost must be good and is . . . our fortune" (CP 374)—unless there could be something doubly ironic in his later work, like "The Auroras of Autumn" say, to set them going again.

II

"Form fascinates," Derrida has written, "when one no longer has the force to understand force from within itself. That is, to create" (*Writing* 4-5). There is not likely a better insight into the opening and closing of the structuralist phases of Stevens' early writing touched on earlier, recycling as it does the conventional tropologies of the High Modernist era. With the onset of *The Man with the Blue Guitar* and *Parts of a World* especially, one tends more and more to sense in his work certain counter-formalist tendencies, the need, that is, to focus more and more of his attention on the power or force of poetic expression in the arguably poststructural phases of his middle- and late-period, the revolving of which, in the context of belief in particular, could continue to nourish the wellsprings of creativity obviously denied him along more foundationalist channels.⁷ The relation between "Credences of Summer" and "The Auroras of Autumn" is of more than passing interest to us in the later phase of Stevens' career perhaps because it recapitulates an impossible tension which the poet undoubtedly would never quite be able to leave behind him. From the perspective of belief in particular, one has to appreciate the considerable gamble Stevens has taken in devoting such inordinate attention to a literary form in "Credences" so antithetical to what today, by postmodern standards, are fairly routine a/theological considerations having to do with the contextualizing, relativizing, and localizing of faith, that, given his sense of irony, were undeniably of far greater interest to him. Early and late readings of the poem which tend to honor it in terms of Stevens' "shift inward to the full activity of a contemplative life" (Riddel 222) and his celebration of some form of "the Romantic sublime" (Carroll 197) perhaps best attest to the risks he took, and for this reason, ought not to be gainsaid. They loom enticingly in the background of any ironist project, as the example of Andrew Marvell earlier has shown. For the ironist, as Richard Rorty remarks, "is continually tempted to try for sublimity, not just beauty."

That is why he is continually tempted to relapse into metaphysics, to try for one big hidden reality rather than for a pattern among appearances . . . To try for the sublime is to try to make a pattern out of the entire realm of *possibility*, not just of some little, contingent, actualities . . . Whereas Plato and Kant had prudently taken this sublimity outside of time altogether, Nietzsche and Heidegger cannot use this dodge. They have to stay in time, but to view themselves as separated from all the rest of time by a decisive event. (105-106)

In Stevens' case, one is given to more than a little speculation concerning whether the writing of yet another longer poem in the seasons of belief so

shortly after "Credences"—"The Auroras of Autumn" was first published in the Winter 1948 number of *The Kenyon Review*—may not represent just such a decisive event in the poet's own efforts to counter, to a degree, some of the subliminal seductiveness of an argument not carried far enough. To a significant extent, certain features of the pastoralism of "Credences" represented a metaphysical tradition that had done in any hope for the renewal of faith laid to rest by Stevens more than thirty years ago, in a poem like "Sunday Morning." In a post-metaphysical age, therefore, one does not angle for the larger Reality and the permanent Possibility, it is true. But neither does one merely "manipulate outworn things," as Emmanuel Levinas has remarked in a related, Heideggerian context, "one brings back the unthought to thought and saying" (44).⁸ From Stevens' perspective, and certainly from the point of view of what passes for received opinion as well, "Credences" may not have been weighted enough by what is *unthought* in the tradition to keep enough of the question of belief in play. If the earlier poem had spoken from the height of human things, then "The Auroras of Autumn" would respond dialectically with acutest speech, but this time, "from the depth" (*CP* 300).

We begin, therefore, not at the beginning of "Auroras," but in canto III, where Stevens expresses most strenuously the desire to give thought over to the unthought, and to speak from the depths of credence. As in much of Stevens' early work, particularly in *Harmonium*, conventional belief in this section is sequestered in a Jamesean-like House of Fiction, partly visible in the evening light. One of Derrida's citations from Hegel in "White Mythology" captures Stevens' mood and imagery precisely here: "[B]y the close of day, man has erected a building constructed from his own inner Sun; and when in the evening he contemplates this, he esteems it more highly than the original external Sun. For now he stands in a *conscious relation* to his Spirit, and therefore a *free* relation. If we hold this image fast in mind, we shall find it symbolizing the course of History, the great Day's work of Spirit" (*Margins* 109-110). Stevens chooses the image of a mother's face to particularize the relation to transcendence, the traditional "purpose of the poem" in the House of Being (*CP* 413). Thus, in conventionally Freudian terms, complete possession of the mother's gaze yields the relation to self-presence, to "transparence" and "present peace," as the canto states (*CP* 413). Maternal meaning fills the room, as the idea of the house gathered up in the fullness of time fills the mind. But just as Stevens' "Auroras" comes to replace his earlier "Credences" in the process of discursive production, so present forms of belief come to be replaced by their alternates. Hence, "the prescience of oncoming dreams," initially repressed in the canto, becomes more and more the presentiment that presence is not total, and that the house "half dissolved" by evening is at least half about a relation to otherness, that is, "the half [its inhabitants]

can never possess" (CP 413). Stevens links his "night of secret difference," in Derrida's phrase (Writing 266), to a force that destroys the mother, yet in such a way that reveals her nature as factitious—her "necklace is a carving not a kiss"—and consequently, susceptible to change. Near the end of the canto, darkness modulates into the poet's favorite wind, whose "grandeurs" announce the passing away of fictional presence with the knock of a rifle-butt, thereby assaulting the "ease" and "shelter of the mind" imaged previously in the sleep of the mother.⁹ But it's as the boreal night that the power of darkness works its most unsettling effects, signaling an interiority which is exterior, and an exteriority interior, by lighting Being's rooms, darkened now by dissolution, with a reflected light *from the outside*. Awed by the mystery of such generative power, humankind becomes resigned, and his "good-night, good-night" (CP 413) shows promise, perhaps, of a shift to new fictions, no doubt the realization of the oncoming dreams previously.

Later, in canto IX, Stevens rehearses once again the ruination of another house of totalized belief—"This drama that we live" (CP 419)—but from a slightly altered perspective. In this section, humankind is portrayed a further time huddled within an interiority of Being or "innocent earth," thinking each other's thoughts, and reenacting a rendezvous with yet another maternal presence.

This drama that we live—We lay sticky with sleep.
This sense of the activity of fate—

The rendezvous, when she came alone,
By her coming became a freedom of the two,
An isolation which only the two could share.
(CP 419)

But it is clear that this maternal figure's arrival only postpones the absence of dissolution and the dissolution of absence temporarily, hence the references to "the guilty dream" at the opening, and to "the imminence [of disaster]," later. For the present, men engorge themselves on a complacency of self-satisfied knowledge—the "decorous honeycomb" (CP 419) reminiscent of "Credences" huge decorum formerly—then lie stuporous in their sticky dreams of self-relation, like "brothers . . . in a home," which is their fate. The specific "drama" Stevens has in mind here is Shakespeare's *Hamlet*—"We were as Danes in Denmark all day long . . . hale-hearted landsmen" (CP 419)—and in particular, the tragic hero's disastrous postponement of time, as he fattens himself on lethe wharf (I.v), we may recall, in a similar self-indulgent preoccupation with the potential loss of presence: "To be, or not to be," etc. (III.i). The "out[-]landish," however (taking Stevens' pun on "landsmen"), in the form of another day "queerer than Sunday," cannot be delayed. Time and change inevitably

arrive to dissipate the dream of innocence, and advance its tragic isolation to a fatal disaster, with the image of corpses “hanging in the trees next spring.” Nothing exceeds like excess, apparently, so that the operations of force, as a wind “sharp as salt” (CP 419), contrive to shift the scene, which is innocence’s greatest fear. The “scholar of one candle,” therefore, in canto VI, who can see the multifarious shifts of force, the “Arctic effulgence” of the Auroras, flaring on the frame of everything he imagines his Being to be, is naturally filled with panic over such inconstant dubbing. The scholar of one candle is Stevens’ counterpart to the Metaphysician in the Dark, and, experiencing precisely in this way what Bloom terms “the anxiety of the infinite” (262) or an anxiety over what a more writerly Derrida calls “an infinite course of entropy” (*Writing* 275), he naturally feels afraid (CP 417).¹⁰ From the monological perspective of such “a single man contained,” life ought *not* to be so impacted with the transformative potential he espies in the auroras:

the lavishing of itself in change,
As light changes yellow into gold and gold
To its opal elements and fire’s delight,

Splashed wide-wise because it likes magnificence
And the solemn pleasures of magnificent space.
(CP 416)

But Stevens’ point, so playfully worked out in the previous “Credences of Summer,” is frankly that life is not reducible to the single form, or frame. Change makes it a veritable drama of alterity, in the canto’s memorable opening image of “a theatre floating through the clouds, / Itself a cloud . . . of cloud transformed / To cloud transformed again, idly, the way / A season changes color *to no end*” (CP 416; emphasis added). There is, consequently, no fixed or determinable teleology at back of change, save for the “misted rock” of change itself. And one senses in Stevens’ own discourse a vast metaphorical accumulation of “half-thought-of forms,” of flying birds, waves of light, cloud drifts, running water, and so forth, all almost bursting to the breaking point, waiting to be played out in the rather more plenipotential than plenitudinous Theater of Trope. It only seems inevitable, then, that such changeful force and forceful change, a nameless “Nothing” which eludes all determination, *must* be destroyed, and so remain *forever* a “thing nameless” (CP 416). For such is the intractable stand-off between one scholar’s unific grasp of form, and the differentiating pleasures of magnificent, textual space.

We perhaps now begin to sense “The Auroras of Autumn” as just such a textual space, and consequently, a further elaboration of Stevens’ theory of metaphorical resemblance dealt with in the last section, so central to the question of belief taken up in “Credences.” In his essay, “Effects of Anal-

ogy," written in the same year as the "Auroras," Stevens expands the notion of resemblance (i.e., "analogy" as "resemblance between parallels" [NA 110]) in discussing two theories of the imagination with which the poet is constantly concerned:

One relates to the imagination as a power within him not so much to destroy reality at will as to put it to his own uses. He comes to feel that his imagination is not wholly his own but that it may be part of *a much larger, much more potent imagination*, which it is his affair to try to get at . . . on the verge of consciousness . . . The second theory relates to the imagination as a power within him to have such insights into reality as will make it possible for him to be sufficient as a poet *in the very center of consciousness* . . . The proponents of the first theory believe that it will be a part of their achievement to have created the poetry of the future . . . The proponents of the second theory believe that to create the poetry of the present is an incalculable difficulty . . . (NA 115; emphases added)

Of the two theories, it is clear that the second, with its attachment to a self-sufficient re-presentation or "reality" located at the very center of consciousness, hence its "incalculable difficulty"—that this theory can not be of much use to Stevens in probing the future course of belief. But the first *can* be, for it connects with Stevens' whole notion of Abstraction back in the opening section of "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," and more specifically, with that power through which the poet "gives to life the supreme fictions without which we are unable to conceive of it" (NA 31), thus yielding "The Ultimate Poem Is Abstract" from the same year as the "Auroras" (CP 429). Later, in the essay on "The Relations between Poetry and Painting" (1951), this will become "the operative force within us [that] does not, in fact, seem to be the sensibility, that is to say, the feelings [but] seems to be a constructive faculty, that derives its energy more from the imagination than from the sensibility," and from (citing Paul Klee) "'the secret places where original law fosters all evolution'" (NA 164, 174). In full pursuit of imaginative energy's "secret places" in this crucial passage, Stevens' discourse, once again, strikes us as quintessentially "postmodern," insofar as Jean-François Lyotard conceives of that vexed term: "that which, in the modern, puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms . . . that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable" (81).¹¹

In making a clear separation between Imagination and Sensibility as Stevens does, which we may correspondingly align with the first and second theories outlined previously, B. J. Leggett has noted an important

“externalizing tendency” in Stevens’ thinking and writing in his late-period, and, typified by “The Auroras of Autumn,” a significant shift, by way of “a phenomenon of rupture,” from “the personal sensibility, the individuality of the artist,” to “the possibility of an imaginative and creative order external to the artist’s private sensibility,” and to the “play of a cosmic imagination” (148, 159-60). Leggett goes on to establish a further, rather convincing case for Stevens’ attraction to a certain force of otherness, characteristic of his first theory of the imagination, as the result of a fairly close reading of Henri Focillon’s *Life of Forms in Art* (1943), although an attraction on Stevens’ part to a “force as a movement external to the house of the mind,” and to “imaginative laws not supplied by the poems’ speakers” (179, 178) conceivably occurs much earlier in the decade, if Stevens’ “Notes” is also rigorously taken into account. But Leggett seems also to want to define the otherness to which Stevens was drawn in terms of the *forms* of Focillon themselves, when it is clear in poems such as “A Primitive Like an Orb” and “Chocorua to Its Neighbor,” where the poet speaks of “the power of . . . form” and wanting to get “beyond / [People’s] form, beyond their life” (CP 443, 299), that Stevens was much more fascinated by the *life* at back of the dissemination of these forms, what in “Credences” he had referred to as “the spirit of the arranged” and “the fund of life and death,” noted earlier (CP 377). Not of course preoccupied with the *question* of belief, Leggett chooses to view this power of expression in terms of a “transcendent human form” (169), an “unseen essence” (183), and most alarmingly, “an external intelligence that is of the same order as [the scholar’s] one candle,” although overwhelming “in its magnitude” (184, emphasis added). Consequently, his reading of an undeniably important influence in the poet’s later work can only offer to Stevens’ arguable ironization of credences “the manifestations of an enthroned god-imagination”—an “external presence free from his own spirit” it is true, but in the form of a great symbol like the aurora borealis, “everywhere present” in Stevens’ longer poem nonetheless, and hence the source of a new “reality outside the mind” (189, 196, 173, 198; emphasis added).¹²

Returning to the text, therefore, what we really want to begin to consider is how Stevens endeavors to ironize his *second* theory of the imagination, worked through, as a matter of faith in the so-called High Modernist Mode, various forms of presence in the early work before “Notes,” and champions instead his *first* theory, contextualized as a question of belief more and more in terms of the force of absence in the work following. The nameless “Nothing” which we left off in canto VI would appear to return us to the ironization according to the first theory, subtended by metaphorical “resemblance” or the effects of analogy. Jacques Derrida, who describes the influence of Focillon on another writer in quite different ways than those

charted above, offers the following interpretation of “Nothing” that is perhaps more in tune with Stevens’ a/theological discourse at this point:

This universe [a non-place in Focillon, and repeated in Jean Rousset] articulates only that which is in excess of everything, the essential nothing on whose basis everything can appear and be produced within language . . . this excess is the very possibility of writing and of literary *inspiration* in general. Only *pure absence*—not the absence of this or that, but the absence of everything in which all presence is announced—can *inspire*, in other words, can *work*, and then make one work . . . since nothing is not an object—is the way in which this nothing *itself* is determined by disappearing . . . The consciousness of having something to say [is] the consciousness of nothing . . . (*Writing* 8)¹³

If the scholar of one candle fails us in his desire to presence the productive absence of Nothing in canto VI, then the figure of the father in canto IV gives us better reason to hope, immersed as he is in a constantly iterated “space,” no doubt “the spacing between desire and fulfillment” (Derrida *Dissemination* 212) that is the essential Nothing through which the credences of summer might more forcefully be revitalized. Seated by the fire, and thus making himself entirely open to the differing and deferring work of the auroras—“motionless and yet / Of motion the ever-brightening origin” (CP 414)—he loses his patriarchal aspect of “bleak regard,” and thus finds himself able to repeat the Nietzschean sacred “yes” that says “Farewell to an idea . . .” (CP 414), and makes him “Master O master” of No-thing, hence a king pro-found in the last stanza. Here, moved by an excess of force, the Master of Nothing joins Stevens’ Necessary Angel from the final section of “Notes” (CP 404), and “leaps from heaven to heaven more rapidly” in the proper pursuit of transformative resemblance than “bad angels,” perhaps the essentializing epicures from “Esthétique” (CP 316, 323), “leap from heaven to hell in flames” (CP 414). He thus becomes as hard-pressed as the company of actors to register the multiplicities of “the naked wind,” the only essential nothing, Derrida observes above, according to which possibility *anything* might be produced.

Anything, of course, includes both the positive *and* negative sides of human experience, as noted in canto VII: the grim right alongside the benevolent, the just and the unjust, night and day, summer and winter, and to be sure, “Credences” and “Auroras.” If there is a nameless Nothing—Stevens almost hesitates to call it “an imagination”—“that sits enthroned” in our spiritual life (CP 417), then it must equally be thought to be “the white creator of black,” as it is the reverse. Although this leaves the earlier “Credences” as merely a shivering residue foreclosed in the

present text, Stevens' point is the same for each poem: that the force of imagination is not unconstrained, but works within articulable limits—analogy as a “resemblance *between* parallels,” which is the Original Law fostering all evolution remarked earlier. Thus, “it dare not leap by chance in its own dark”; rather, it must “change from destiny” (CP 417). So it is this infinite calculus of freedom begotten within fate which becomes the most compelling reason for bringing the companion poems together in the present study, as Stevens knew only too well himself when he writes in the present canto that form or “shape” is a “mournful making,” and as a condition of force, “move[s] to find / What must unmake it” (CP 418).¹⁴ Paul Ricoeur's general observation, therefore, that the effects of analogy beget as they transgress (24) is well taken here, which is perhaps what Stevens also has in mind when he characterizes the whole process as a “flippant communication” in the last line of the present canto.

The utter indeterminacy of Imagination's fateful freedom would thus appear ironically to be the “point” of Stevens' opening meditation on the serpent, linked to the Northern Lights from the point of view of both form and force: “This is where the serpent lives” (CP 411). Geoffrey Hartman makes the quite relevant suggestion that “the serpent is the first deconstructor of the logos [by proving] that the Word may have more than one sense or a sense other than intended” (8).¹⁵ In Stevens' text, such duplicity is extended in the direction of the serpent's infinite capacity for metamorphosis. A decade earlier, Stevens had dealt with this image as a problematic of transformative change in the opening stanza of “Farewell to Florida” (CP 117). Now, he perhaps sees a positive power in the image, as it foregrounds a crisis in the whole issue of truth and apparent truth. For as a disembodied entity in the present canto, the serpent is neither determinate (“body's slough”) at the end of a whole tradition of Platonic and Kantian metaphysics. Nor is it indeterminate exactly (“Another bodiless”), since its ouroborotic ring of pure and endless light, in the tag from Traherne, is a head of air and a tail in every sky (CP 411). Like force, whose absent presence is manifested in a present absence, the errant and ambiguous serpent is body and non-body at once since, as Charles Winquist observes, “we cannot know the realm of force as force but only as it is implied or represented in the realm of meaning” (23). Stevens would prefer to reverse the perspective, and have “form gulping after formlessness” (CP 411), that is, a serpent body flashing without its skin because the mediacy of skin subverts a whole post-metaphysical chain of “wished-for disappearances,” and one can only invoke meaning by revoking it in one and the same gesture. Our being master of this enigmatic maze, therefore, *provokes* a double-gesture of belief: on the one hand, seeing the auroras fixing an emblazoned “pole” in the found-image of the serpent, and on the other hand, in the unfound-image of “another nest,” *not* seeing “body

and air and forms and images" as ultimately certain signs, what Stevens refers to as the "possession of happiness" (CP 411). In the end, our belief must be "that we should disbelieve," if that were possible, in other words, to take the beliefs so essential to metaphysics, in Rorty's words, "as just another text, just another set of little human things" (93). At this point, it seems only appropriate for Stevens to deploy a bit of his own White Mythology, as he does with the white cabin, white flowers, and white afternoon in the following canto, in order to bid "Farewell to an idea" once again, and install the "consequence / Of an infinite [dis]course," predictably linked to a blowing wind, in its place:

The season changes. A cold wind chills the beach.
The long lines of it grow longer, emptier,
A darkness gathers though it does not fall

And the whiteness grows less vivid on the wall.
The man who is walking turns blankly on the sand.
He observes how the north is always enlarging the
change . . .

(CP 412)

In most acute dialogue with "Credences" here, whose North we remember would have all things stop in that one direction, the north that is always enlarging change in the above passage makes sure only that the Metaphysician in the Dark, the incredible ironist who returns Crispin's inland cabin to the margins of "the ructive sea" (CP 41), himself turns, and turns "blankly on the sand." We ourselves re-turn to the season of beliefs from before, and think of them now more as the velocities of change, curiously finding assurance in the gathering darkness of force that continually threatens to dissipate form: "the whiteness [that] grows less vivid on the wall," in the passage cited.¹⁶ Chilling the beach, and emptying it of all determinate content in this way, it acts as the provocation to further *douceurs/tristesses*, long lines which will grow even longer, as the text itself will eventually bear out.

Mark Taylor is one of several contemporary a/theologians who attaches a definite religious reverence to the kind of writing Stevens puns on in the preceding "lines," as the highly contextualized and variable power of articulatory expression. "Scripture is the divine milieu," he writes, and the divine milieu is writing."

The milieu embodied in word and inscribed in/by writing is divine insofar as it is the creative/destructive medium of everything that is and all that is not . . . This play of differences or differential web of interrelation is universally constitutive . . . Though the divine milieu is never simply present or absent,

it is the *medium* of all presence and absence. In this complex mean, opposites, that do not remain themselves, cross over into each other and thus dissolve all original identity. (116)¹⁷

In canto VIII of "The Auroras of Autumn," Stevens comes very close to this sense of reverence by attaching to the serpentine auroras a type of innocence: "An innocence of the earth and no false sign / Or symbol of malice" (CP 418). Indeed, he attributes to them a "holiness" into which we enter as innocent children "in the dark" in a favorite phrase from the late work, and that significantly keeps us awake in the midst of "the quiet of sleep," a reference once again to our more usual humanistic dream of transcending the mere innocence of earth, and engaging completed presence in a world elsewhere. The dream's time and place continue to be sung for us by the mother within a darkened room back in canto III. But by this late stage in the poem, we now know it can only be a song half-heard, since the full drama must also include the role which the power of the divine milieu *plays* in constituting that place, and that time. Moreover, one can speak about the generality of time in this operation, as in "a time of innocence" in stanza one. But "There is never a place" (CP 418)—de-scription without place, as it were—which can only be a matter of historical and contingent determination. But even making the auroras "a thing of time" is perhaps risking not a little, threatening to turn it into something too much like an "idea" not at all like the First Idea of "Notes" (CP 418), and thereby finding in force another dreaded credence, which could only *mean* the end of it. "There is an almost irresistible temptation," J. Hillis Miller has recently pointed out, "to think of the thing, matter, law, or force latent in the text as some kind of religious or metaphysical entity, the 'Absolute' as transcendent spirit," and has further suggested (following Walter Benjamin) that foregrounding the "unreadability" of the textual other, might be a way of getting round collapsing a linguistic protocol into its transcendental counterpart (122).¹⁸ Stevens won't go this far. He wants his "calamity," it is true, to exist hypothetically in the idea of it alone, as "pure principle," and allow its nature to be its own end (CP 418). Still, he nonetheless desires it to have some availability as a *real* thing so that "it should be, and yet not be, a thing." His preference, therefore, is for a de-scription of the auroras which is unreadable and readable *together*: "Like a book at evening beautiful but untrue, / Like a book on rising beautiful and true" (CP 418). In just this way, his own Divine Milieu, will thus resist the intelligence *almost* successfully (OP 197). As he queries in another place in *Opus Posthumous* from the same year: "I wonder, have I lived a skeleton's life, / As a *disbeliever* in reality" (OP 117; emphasis added).

To conclude: in the Auroras of Autumn which appear in Book IX about half-way through his novel *Pierre Or, The Ambiguities* (1852), Herman Melville writes: "we learn that it is not for man to follow the trail of truth too

far, since by so doing he entirely loses the directing compass of his mind; for arrived at the Pole, to whose barrenness only it points, there, the needle indifferently respects all points of the horizon alike" (196). By the tenth and final canto of his own text, Wallace Stevens has, in fact, pushed truth beyond the compass of individual consciousness, to the point where his northern lights can respect all manner of propositional predication: unhappy people in a happy world, unhappy people in an unhappy world, happy people in an unhappy world, and so forth. For it is not that we are, at the conclusion, merely left with the forms of truth, which by themselves would be "too many mirrors for misery," and so the full of fate (*CP* 420). We are also given the full of fortune as the "contrivance" of our fate, thus removing the sense of truth as assertion, and inviting us to think about it more in terms of expression, in terms, as Charles Altieri puts it, of "some form of the maker's presence as a constitutive force of meaning" (149), such as the rabbi Stevens mentions, and "the phases of [his] difference" (*CP* 420) which demystify facile generalization.¹⁹ With this linguistic apprehension of belief, mediated by the power of expression as "The vital, the never-failing genius" (*CP* 420), the Metaphysician in the Dark senses the potential of humankind to live out "all lives" that it might be possible to know, without getting hung up on any one of them. Accordingly, in fulfilling meditations both great and small, this Genius, which is the fullness both of fortune *and* of fate, contrives a kind of balance or wholeness in people's lives. But it can do this only by breaking open our too theologically enclosed and centered selves, mewed up "in winter's nick," and by converting hushful paradise into something more "harridan," through the action and energy of a haggling wind. How evanescent are the credences of summer straw, we are led to surmise in Stevens' last line, next to the awful "blaze" of such boreal power. Michel Foucault once saw the death of God in such a blaze, and the nothingness in a world "made and unmade by that excess which transgresses it" (*Language* 32). But is the truth of *that* Nothing the "Auroras'" answer to the direction, back in "Credences," where all things stop? Having taken us just this far along his Milky Way, Stevens' companion poems, in that final conflagration, would leave their ultimate Truth exceedingly open to question. For it is in the light of an "incinerating blaze where nothingness appears [that] we remain in disbelief itself" (Derrida *Memoires* 21).

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Notes

¹Wallace Stevens, "Esthétique du Mal," in *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*, 322; hereafter, referred to in the text as *CP*. Other abbreviations employed to refer to the work of Wallace Stevens throughout the remainder of this essay are as follows: *NA*: *The*

Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination; *L: Letters of Wallace Stevens*; *OP: Opus Posthumous*.

²Hayden White's analysis of the rhetorical direction of his models of similarity and difference followed here would appear to square with Ricoeur's assessment of the "movement 'from . . . to . . .'" or "deviation" of metaphor as a global "trope of resemblance" referred to previously (see also *Rule* 12, 24). For the rhetorical relations between Stevens' first two books in terms of a synchronic immanence/transcendence, and a more probable Cycle of Romance, see my "'The Gorgeous Wheel': Circulating the Pleasures of Romance," an unpublished paper on the subject of "Wallace Stevens and the Question of Genre," presented at the NEMLA Conference in Toronto, Canada, 6 April 1990.

³Later in Study 6 of *The Rule*, entitled "The Work of Resemblance," Ricoeur makes his case for the "properly predicative or attributive" as opposed to the "substitutive essence" of metaphor thoroughly poststructural by using "resemblance," exactly as Stevens describes it, to break apart the bi-polar metaphoric/metonymic symmetry in the linguistic analysis of Roman Jakobson: "Metaphor—unusual attribution—is a semantic process, in the sense of Benveniste, perhaps even the *genetic* phenomenon *par excellence* in the realm of the instance of discourse" (198). In much the same way, Stevens' earlier metaphoric/metonymic Romance-cycle is transcended.

⁴The fact that we *do* require a text like "Credences" to say all of this merely goes to prove, ironically, as Jacques Derrida writes, that "[t]here is no assured destination precisely because of the mark and the proper name: in other words, because of this insignificance" ("My Chances" 39).

⁵Distribution of discursive forces is the sense given by Foucault (*History* 100-101). In Stevens' discourse, we might say that distribution is to resemblance as substitution is to representation, the difference lying between the velocity of becoming and the stability of being. On the notion of "velocity," Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet observe: "This question of speed is important and also very complex. It doesn't mean the first in the race: you can be late through speed. It doesn't mean changing either: you can be invariable and constant through speed. Speed is to be caught in a becoming—which is not a development or an evolution . . . What you misnamed style just now—charm or style—is speed" (32). Accordingly, the present interpretation privileges the *velocity* in change, rather than the thematization of change itself as a *demonstrable* effect, what Stevens himself had intended by the words "manner" and "style" already alluded to, back in "Description without Place" (*CP* 340, 345).

⁶Thus, for his "Inaugural Lecture," Barthes writes: "The forces of freedom which are in literature depend not on the writer's civil person, nor on his political commitment—for he is, after all, only a man among others—nor do they even depend on the doctrinal content of his work, but rather on the labor of displacement he brings to bear upon the language" (462). Hence, Stevens' exhortation to his *own* "civil bird" concerning diction's way, previously scanned.

⁷For a further expansion of this view, see my "Crispin's Dependent 'Airs,'" 1-13.

⁸One therefore may be somewhat perplexed to note that even Harold Bloom, who is otherwise quite prepared to make a rhetorical case for "The Auroras of Autumn" as "an ironic allegory," will nevertheless concede in the very final statement of his lengthy analysis of the text "that no other twentieth-century poem in English takes us further or more powerfully into the mode of the Sublime" (259 and 280).

⁹Deleuze and Parnet in the *Dialogues* provide an interesting intersection with the further discrediting of the mother at this point: "It is never filiations which are important, but alliances, alloys; these are not successions, lines of descent, but contagions,

epidemics, *the wind*" (69, emphasis added). Cf. also Derrida's association of "a power of pure equivocality" with the Hebraic *ruah* (=wind), in *Writing*, 9.

¹⁰Derrida's non-concept for such infinite power, of course, is *différance*, and he describes the natural reaction to such an incomprehensible presentiment in quite similar terms to Stevens: "Not only is there no realm of *différance*, but *différance* is even the subversion of every realm. This is obviously what makes it threatening and necessarily dreaded by everything in us that desires a realm, the past or future presence of a realm" (*Speech* 153). Cf. also the role of dangerous "metaphor" in philosophic discourse: "dangerous and foreign as concerns *intuition* (vision or contact), *concept* (the grasping or proper presence of the signified), and *consciousness* (proximity or self-presence)" (*Margins* 270). For a quite different view of the scholar presented here, see Bates, *Mythology*, 276.

¹¹Further down, the passage concludes: "Finally, it must be clear that it is our business *not to supply reality* but to invent allusions to the conceivable which cannot be presented" (emphasis added). Two years later in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" (1949), Stevens himself will speak of "Search[ing] a possible for its possibleness" (*CP* 481).

¹²Helen Vendler also remarks that the northern lights "corresponds perfectly to the bravura of [Stevens'] imagination," although this is somewhat offset later when she finds a connection between "the celestial aurora" and the "earthly wind" as "two manifestations of the same force" which serves "no revelatory function," but rather a "gorgeous will-to-change" (246, 255, 259, and 262). Similarly, Leggett's later ascriptions of the "Life of Forms" as "the embodiment of a benevolent force" (191), a "godlike force external to the poet's own imagination" (192), and a kind of "paradox" that "imagines us . . . [and] lives our[] [lives] fully and completely" (193), all help to mitigate some of the logocentric implications of his reading. Still, the *identification* of Focillon's force with a godlike Imagination, as tempting as it is, would appear to move counter to the poet's more advanced theorizing about metaphorization as "resemblance"—displacement rather than replacement, which can only be "the vanishing-point of resemblance" (*NA* 72) dealt with earlier.

¹³Cf. further Derrida *Margins* 172, n16, and *Speech* 127-28, n14. Martin Heidegger theorizes about "Nothing" in precisely similar ways (in "What is Metaphysics?" 100-101), and it is possible to speculate about Stevens' coming under the influence of such a notion via this source, in his later years.

¹⁴"Stevens's existential project," Mutlu Blasing remarks, is thus "to show that our freedom is our fate, our discourse is our nature, our imagination our destruction" (89). Helen Vendler's observing an "energy of repudiation directed toward *Credence* [*sic*] of *Summer* in *The Auroras of Autumn*" (248), in view of the foregoing is perhaps correct, but only up to a point.

¹⁵Harold Bloom notes that "the ultimate meaning of the serpent of the *Auroras* [is] death," i.e., "the necessity of change" (256), but it is perhaps better to think of "death" in this context as Maurice Blanchot describes it in *The Writing of the Disaster*, a text especially relevant to the study of "The Auroras of Autumn": "Not as death itself, but as a death that is always other, with which we do not communicate, but for which we bear the unbearable responsibility. No relation, then (in death), to violence and aggression . . . the disaster would be beyond what we understand by death or abyss . . . in the disaster I disappear without dying (or die without disappearing)" (118-19). Both Vendler (268) and Bloom (278) observe Stevens' sensitivity to the ambiguity of the etymology of disaster in the massing of the stars throughout the poem, in Vendler's words, "these flaring lights, and the apprehensive *questions* they raise" (emphasis added).

¹⁶In Derrida's own infamous White Mythology, "metaphysics has erased within itself the fabulous scene that has produced it, the scene that nevertheless remains active and stirring, inscribed in white ink, an invisible design covered over in the palimpsest" (*Margins* 213). Hence, Irony for Derrida becomes synonymous with Stevens' own Metaphysician in the Dark: "a trope which cannot stop turning and turning and turning around, since we can only speak of a (rhetorical) turn by way of *another* trope . . . the irony of irony" (*Memoires* 152, n8).

¹⁷The problematizing of "original identity" is once more significant here, and again foregrounds Stevens' posture as "ironist." Cf. Deleuze and Parnet: "An ironist is someone who discusses principles; he is seeking a first principle, a principle which comes even before the one that was thought to be first, he finds a course which is even more primary than the others" (68). Hence, Blanchot's pregnant suggestion that "the 'possibility' of writing is linked to the 'possibility' of irony" (35; cf. also 47, 61, and 63).

¹⁸Harold Bloom is quite correct, therefore, in pointing out that the auroras is "its own First Idea and [must] resist becoming 'an imagined thing,'" and is therefore more properly thought of as a necessary "agency of the undoing which rhetorically converts synecdoches to metonymies," hence "an interplay, an endless decentering of itself" (261, 266, and 276, respectively).

¹⁹For a further elaboration of Stevens' characterization of Rabbinic thought, which additionally provides "room for difference, conflict, and contradiction," as well as "multiple predication," see Handelman 56, 160, and further, Derrida "Shibboleth" 345-46.

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Announcement

The second annual conference of the American Literature Association will be held at the Mayflower Hotel in Washington DC on May 24-26, 1991. Preregistration will be \$30 (with a special rate of \$10 for independent scholars, retired individuals, and students). The hotel is offering a conference rate of \$60 a night (single or double). To register or obtain housing information, write to Professor Alfred Bendixen, English Dept., California State University, Los Angeles, Los Angeles, CA 90046.

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Poems

Taking Stevens South

In the small towns of the south
when the young men horse around
around the turning of the season

into gold, it is not money
or television lauds that sing
the trees to sleep in the eye

of the storm, and it is not love
that makes the girls
make do with their humble sewing

of dark plans into walls. Bread
is not mud, pheasant not black
bird. When the tambourine

and the fiddle join in, Hollywood
crumples. The wooden leg on stage
waltzes virile and strong

into the swampy sun, trailing
muck through the hall. A better
time? That fellah's future

is as good as it gets. It is not
ocean, it is not rose:
young men howl

across cotton fields
at the tops of their lungs (somewhere
a rattlesnake

complicates
furrow after furrow)
and the washboard

and the guitar
take up from the crickets
their only country's anthems.

Brian Clements
SUNY, Binghamton

About Before the Bacchanal

Jacob, wrestling with the angel, called Time,
And, weaving toward the women in their caps,

Apparently passed out. He has not done,
The women said among themselves, so hot.

The angel preened, he flexed his wings,
And he prepared to pounce—he figured

He had won the crown. Then Jacob,
Having pulled a Lazarus, sprang up

And pinned the angel to the ground.
The women clapped, they tossed their caps,

They carried Jacob into town; and,
Plying him with aphrodisiac,

Succeeded, where the angel'd failed,
In getting Jacob to go down.

Robert Noreault
Massena, NY

Something from Nothing

When is a being both itself and not?
A sand heap's still a heap, minus one grain.
Now take another grain—repeat—again—
Soon Nothing and your heap share the same spot.
Conversely, no heap plus one grain gives still
No heap; repeat n times—no heap, one dune?
Grow grains to pebbles, then stones; logic soon
Piles rocks, though yet unheaped, into a hill.
What have you then? A rockpile? That connotes
Unpleasant guards, aching muscles, blistered hands—
The sophist's apt reward. A hill of stones
Is something else—beau mont—imagined lands
Visible beyond, through which enchanted boats
Drift seaward. It's in the undertones.

Thomas C. Grey
Stanford Law School

Our Regret

The poems of our climate
have holes in their ozone.
They put us under dangerous rays
and make us suspicious of hot days.
We'll be praising snow and ice soon in new ways.

And what about the noctilucent clouds
that glow before and aft
the daylong, ultraviolet bath?
What about the longer, deeper, colder blue
we've after all been after?
This crust of mind our uplift grew
inhabits now no unhandelled savage veneer,
but a dog-eared, tattered troposphere
loaded like a die.

Still more this landfill wants
than its anatomy can conceal.
What sunblock for these cries
or toothpick parasol or shield?

The chlorofluorocarbons are not
subjects, verbs, or objects.
Their bond is on our skin
in rugged black dumbbells.

Pale brown in a krill-less ocean,
blue and fragile gases.
Not even with your hands
sleeved in mandarin fashion
may you avoid the particly air,
forecasting particles.

Is it, the noosphere,
with its indomitable aging lungs
and foot-dragging, the real article?
Or is it like the golf-green felt
stamped with chances on a table?

The toxic is our model.
And so is lyric piled on lyric till the sun is met
with layer on layer of greenhouse regret.

Mark Scott
Highland Park, NJ

Reviews

Lyric Contingencies: Emily Dickinson and Wallace Stevens.

By Margaret Dickie. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991.

What good is it to read a work of literary criticism all the way through without being free to imagine someone human having written it? It is not always easy. I know nothing of Margaret Dickie—nor she of me, which is no reflection on either of us—but I imagine her as like myself in many ways: a middle-aged person trained in formalism who, being required (or requiring herself, or no longer able to tell the difference) to write a book, wants naturally to make it up-to-date. That is not easy, because her training is deeply rooted in more innocent and youthful times, and the ideas of the people she must consult and incorporate in order to update her analysis have not taken hold, and she hasn't read these people as deeply as she would have if she liked them. Irigaray, Bataille, Rorty, Jakobson, Lacan, Derrida, et al., are smuggled into her argument quickly, weary and blinking, from contexts that are not described, and then dismissed, leaving behind whatever small stardust or lusters they have been able to bring with them on such short notice. She acknowledges that they "may" be right about this or that, but like as not, she'll follow this with a "rather" or "however" and go about her business, pleased with them as luminaries but knowing they don't mix very well. Her heart isn't with them.

What is her business and where is her heart? Dickie has some careful and reasonable things to say about Dickinson and Stevens that are more or less formalist and thematic: the use of repetition in, the suppositional self of, the importance of touch in Dickinson; family figures in, the implied audience of, unsatisfied women in Stevens—and a good many others as well. These are useful subjects, some of them touching gracefully on old and recent controversies in Stevens criticism (including the Lentricchia/Gilbert & Gubar snit). Dickie writes about them with the comfortable, lapidary impersonality of a good formalist critic. Students and teachers will want to consult her index and read appropriate passages free of the imposition of at least a harsh critical agenda.

But what, then, of "lyric contingencies"? What of Dickinson and Stevens together? What of this as a *book*? Here Dickie falters, as much because of her strengths as her weaknesses. She's too smart to impose—effectively, at any rate—on this material. She's liable to drift from topics with a contemporary urgency ("Stevens and Metonymy") with what seems to be a charming unconsciousness. She has structured her book with an almost finical symmetry: Introduction—three chapters on Dickinson (Lyric Self, Metonymy, Audience), three on Stevens (Lyric Self and so on)—Conclusion. Yet all but the Introduction wander, and are the better for it, because her "thesis" about the lyric is neither ambitious nor elaborated enough to sustain a book-length argument.

According to her, the lyric genre allowed both poets "to insist on the particularity and individuality of their own imaginations," to express unfixed,

unstable and open-ended identities. This is persuasive and unsurprising. As if sensing this, she doesn't insist on it beyond an occasional reminder. It is, after all, a general enough idea for her to be able to repeat it, with variations, without seeming to impose it.

But this isn't enough. Dickie wants to recuperate Dickinson and Stevens for Cultural Studies. She says both poets wrote "in a culture that did not value the [lyric] genre and read in a cultural tradition of idealism imperfectly suited to lyric poetry." This valuation and this tradition are not traced. She says both poets "used the genre to question the cultural certainties of the individual and the language," but these certainties are not illustrated, beyond a few references to Emerson. Both poets "call into question the culture's system of values," a system involving an ideal, representative, "centered" self. No such system is elaborated, and we are left to imagine that in Dickinson's and then again in Stevens' time the lyric was a subversive, cutting-edge genre, a slap in the face of our poor, Puritan, centralized culture. But there is no historicism, new or old, to buttress these assertions. What can she be referring to when she says that by Dickinson's time "The model of a single culture had been overthrown [!] in favor of the idea of cultures without a necessary evolutionary pattern, suggesting a world of separate, distinctive, and diversely meaningful ways of life"? Maybe one of her visiting luminaries left this vague little multicultural piety, but she isn't saying, she drops it, her heart isn't in it.

I like to think Dickie included this material at a grantwriter's or a press's request. She writes well, and often enough with eloquence ("Writing is the route that brings us home and forever estranges us from where we are"), though she can get herself tangled when she tries to be *au courant*: "And genealogy . . . is a peculiar form of reading and writing that links past with present, moves along lines of contingency, that threatens to fade in time when children 'picking up our bones' cannot generate the metonymic chain that would allow them to decipher either the life or the legacy." Such clumsy stitching is the result, I imagine, of Dickie's need to write a book. Wouldn't it be lovely for us academics if we were tenured and promoted and sent to conferences in exotic locales if we just wrote graceful essays that we would all enjoy reading? I know I would enjoy Margaret Dickie's.

Fred Miller Robinson
University of Massachusetts

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